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You must be completely out of your mind.

Megan wasn't crazy, though, and neither was Carter. She looked into her husband's blue eyes, which he managed to make warm behind his oval lenses, and she knew that he was both completely sane and completely serious.

"You said you'd do anything to save her," Carter said.

Megan nodded. "And I would. I'd do anything that would save her. But *come on*. What you're saying is ludicrous, absurd, monstrous, cr—"

"Crazy, yes, you mentioned that. But you know it'll work almost as well as I do."

She did. She hadn't seen and done all the things that Carter had, but she had seen and done enough. "State your *proposal*. I need to hear it again."

"My *proposal*." Carter laughed, shallow, derisive. "I propose," he said, "that there is something you and I both want more than anything else in the world. We want our daughter, Caitlin, to grow up and be the bright, beautiful, healthy woman she ought to be. The question is, how far are we willing to go to make that happen?"

Megan didn't often allow herself the idea of Caitlin growing up, but as Carter spoke, a mental image of Caitlin's wasted child-face morphed into vibrant womanhood. The image made her smile, and the smile forced water from the corner of her eye. At the cradle she had spent hours gazing at her

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daughter's face, looking past it, past the questions about which side of the family she favored more and about whether those smiles were happy dreams or gas. She gazed past the present and into the future, into the time when those adorable features would be finished, set and ready for the life that Megan would have prepared her for. The diagnosis and prognosis were God's way of mocking those naïve, greedy hours. They were a punishment for her pride. They chastised presumptuous hope.

"I propose," Carter continued, "that either one of us would do anything in our power to save her. *Anything*. Even—we'd kill for it, wouldn't we?"

Megan's neck was rigid. She didn't breathe again until Carter's voice resumed.

"Of course we would," Carter said. "Who wouldn't kill to save their own child?" He paused, measuring her. "I propose that saving our daughter's life is so important that it changes around the meanings of moral and immoral, crazy and sane. I can't think about her lying in that hospital bed and worry about whether saving her is the *moral* thing."

Megan heard him, not what he said but what he meant. The whole world changed when he thought about the cancer that was destroying his baby's bones, her lungs, her lymph nodes, the sickness that was eating her from the inside out, rotting her, killing her. It had already been a year. It could be two, even three more. With these new treatments, with these new clinical test groups, who knew? Recurrent synchronous multifocal osteosarcoma. Bone cancer. It drove Carter straight past crazy and around again to a new kind of sane, and Megan was right there with him. The cancer was God's sick joke on Megan, Carter, and their six-year-old child. If God came down to apologize, Megan would not have hesitated to wrap her fingers around his Almighty throat. Of course she'd kill to save her little girl. She'd do it if she had to. She'd do it because she *wanted* to.

"I propose that anybody who had the power to save their child from that bed and all those tubes and the pain and the hair loss and the infected incisions and..." Carter stopped to dab a finger in the corner of one of his tepid blue eyes. "The thing is," he began again, "most people don't have that kind of power." He cleared his throat. "We do."

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The reassurance in Carter's eyes told Megan that he knew she was getting closer to admitting what they had already decided. "We have the power," he said, "and you know how it works. I've told you. To get something you have to give something up. That's pretty much a rule of life, paranormal or otherwise. To force your will on the world you have to be willing to—you have to prove you're willing to—you have to have a will strong enough to bend the rules of what's real and what isn't. Will comes from suffering. Will comes from sacrifice. We have to make a sacrifice if we want our daughter to live."

Megan hated her husband for the first time. The feeling was strong but ephemeral.

Carter cracked another laugh. "It sounds so *empty* when I say it, doesn't it? As if sacrifice were something abstract. Like the 'sacrifice' of working so many hours a week to put food on the table. Like the 'sacrifice' of choosing the lesser career so you have time to be home with your family. I only wish it were that easy. But you know the kind of sacrifice I'm talking about."

Carter was building up to it as if it were something grand or sexy. Megan grinded her teeth, clenched her fists, and twisted her bare heel against the carpet, hot with friction. Say it, Carter. It's not an abstract. Say *human* sacrifice. Say that you want to kill a baby. Our baby. Say it again, Carter. Say it.

"I propose that I go into that closet and open up that box that I haven't touched in years, the box that I pretend not to think about. The box with the book in it. I'm going to open the book and look at the page I see in my head as clearly now as I saw it ten years ago. I'll look at it, and I'll show it to you, and we'll see that on that page is the exact prescription for saving our daughter's life. Let's see if I remember it: 'In the lore of one tribe there is a ritual used to restore the life of a first-born child through the intervention of a disembodied will. The intervention requires the sacrifice of another child from the same parents.' We'll check that later to see if I got the words right. The book describes the ritual, Megan—the words to say, the way to do it. And as we both know, the book does not lie." Carter looked into Megan's eyes. His warmth said he was now certain that he had won. "I propose that we take

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a good long look at that book and think about saving our daughter.”

“Okay,” Megan said. “Open the box. Look at the book. Just know that you have to do it. I have to do everything else, but you have to do *it*. I’ll go through forty weeks of Hell, but that last moment, that last step, is yours. Do you understand me? It’s yours, goddamn it, yours and yours alone.”

Carter nodded, and Megan sighed. They didn’t have a second child. *That* was what Carter proposed. They needed to have a second child to save their first. Carter wanted her to get pregnant. Forty weeks, nine months, a lifetime. A life.

And what if Caitlin dies before the baby arrives?

Don’t call it a baby, Megan. It’s merely—something we’re making, a cure. Don’t think about it like a baby or you’ll go mad.

But *what if*, Carter, what if? He never answered that one. He never said, “Then we’ll already have another one.” A *replacement*. Either way, they would have one living child. Unless, of course, it didn’t work. Unless they killed one child to save another and both ended up dead. But it *would* work. Carter was certain. It was ludicrous, absurd, monstrous, and crazy, but Megan was just as certain as he was. She couldn’t have satisfied anyone with an explanation of *why* she was certain. She had seen things, impossible things, but that wasn’t all. It was a feeling in her gut, in her chest, in the air in her uninfected lungs. It was more than presumptuous hope now. It was absolute will. It was power.

The decision they made needed reinforcement. Megan would have trouble falling asleep and then wake up sweating, trembling, shaking her head back and forth as if she could dispel the nightmare they had decided to live. Carter would reassure her, coming up with new points of view she might use to placate herself. He summoned all the *when does life begin* arguments that had ever been made, and he used his supple and overtrained brain to construct favorable positions based on unctuous but irresistible logic. It wouldn’t be murder. Caitlin is more alive than the thing, the cure, would be. Life comes from living; the cure would never live, not really. Not doing it, not using the power they had—*that* would be murdering their child, their daughter that they had loved more than life itself for the last six years.

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When Megan's courage faltered most, Carter pointed out that they were already complicit in Caitlin's condition, which would deepen their guilt if they took the easy, comfortable route of inaction. "My knee hurts, Mommy." Caitlin had tripped on the stairs. Of course her knee hurt. First one week, and then another, and then a fit of tears in the middle of the night had roused them enough for a trip to the emergency room. If they had stopped the first tumor earlier, if they had gone to the right doctor first, if they had paid more attention—but they hadn't. Their complicity was fact, and their obligation was clear.

Carter used emotions, and Carter used politics. The ritual, Carter said, was traditionally used to save first-born sons. It would work to save daughters, too, but traditionally it involved the killing of daughters to save sons. Why not turn murderous chauvinism on its head? Carter had to read the book between the lines to get at its implicit sexism, but he was confident in his interpretation. Carter was always confident in his interpretations. Books were what he did for a living. Before Caitlin's diagnosis, he had been close to finishing his dissertation on the modernist novel, close to a doctorate from one of the most prestigious Literature programs in the country. The end of Megan's education had been college graduation, when the long black robes had not entirely concealed the protrusion that would become Caitlin. Carter never mentioned the superiority of his education directly, but it always hung in the air whenever Megan had the audacity to challenge him. If Carter said the ritual was used to save first-born sons, then it was. Megan believed him. Think about all the daughters, Carter argued, the daughters killed for the sake of sons—not just in rituals like this one, but in China, in every part of the world in every era of history where boys are worth everything and girls are worth less than dirt. Our daughter is worth more than that, Megan. Our daughter is worth anything.

Murder. To conceive, carry, and bear a child for the sake of murdering it. It, her, or him.

People do worse. Couples have babies to harvest stem cells or organs. What we're doing... it's not a baby. Don't think of it that way. It's a cure. It. Forty weeks.

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But it took longer than forty weeks. Megan's cycle had always been very regular, very predictable, but calculating the exact timing of ovulation—especially without the help of a doctor—was tricky business. Even with perfect timing there were no guarantees. They tried repeatedly. They failed repeatedly.

Megan felt the horror of their plan, but it was distant, still lingering outside the bubble of sadness they had lived in since Caitlin's first trip to the hospital. In January Megan's trip home from her office at the Penser Foundation was always after dark, even when she didn't stop by the hospital on her way. The crunch of human bodies into subway cars and the treachery of ice-slicked sidewalks brought her home. When she arrived, Carter was sometimes there and sometimes not, depending on whether he had decided to go work in the library. Even when he was there, the apartment was empty. There was an untenanted room with pink curtains and a big Barbie townhouse. There was a loneliness heavier than all the tall buildings that surrounded them and blocked out the sun.

A few months after Caitlin had received her diagnosis and begun her endless oscillation between home and hospital, Megan's mother, the celebrated Susan Penser, had warned Megan and Carter to "maintain an active sex life." "It's therapeutic," Susan said. "It's important for the two of you to stay close, for my granddaughter's sake as well as your own." Susan's prying into their sex life affronted Carter more than it did Megan, but neither could deny Susan's wisdom. Even though they didn't feel comfortable with the idea that sexual desire required effort, they understood that intimacy would be different now that their world had been fractured. Intimacy was something they had to relearn. They made the required effort, and though it was never the same, sex eventually felt natural again. More than once they had come home from the hospital feeling sick from seeing their unconscious daughter's wan face, and Carter had started kissing Megan's saltwater-streaked cheek. She would welcome his caresses even as the tears continued to fall. Carter was capable of almost incredible gentleness, and he could sense the line between enough and too much without a cue.

The first time they tried to conceive their second child, or *it*, Carter was

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waiting when Megan got home. He had made dinner and lit candles. He wore his green sweater, Megan's favorite, the heavy one that fit snugly in the chest, making him look strong but soft. The candlelit dinner marked the evening as special, but there was no inescapable specificity in the specialness. Occasionally Megan could look at her husband with the flames flickering between them without thinking, *This is the night when murder begins*. She could spear lettuce with her fork, put it in her mouth, and chew without thinking about what the hands that made the salad would eventually do. She had an appetite, and she ate well. Megan and Carter were used to the effort of intimacy; they could handle the extra exertion required by their new circumstances.

After they finished eating, Carter suggested that they leave the dishes for the morning. "No," Megan said, "I want to do them now." Megan's tone was severe, and Carter didn't argue. They cleared the table together. Megan washed the plates and wineglasses while Carter blew out the candles and put them away. When she set the last glass on the dish rack, her hand hovered near the stem, frozen in the air. She inhaled deeply and let the air squeak out through tight lips.

Megan returned to the living room. She saw that Carter's hands were shaking. Hers were not. She took another deep breath, exhaled freely, and steadied her husband's hands between her own. She led him into the bedroom. While she unbuttoned her blouse, he stood watching, silent, motionless. Tossing the blouse aside, she took a step closer to him and placed her fingers at the bottom rim of his soft green sweater. He raised his arms as she pulled upwards, allowing her to undress him. Once he was naked, she told him to sit on the edge of the bed while she finished undressing. It was not a striptease; it was a slow, methodical removal of clothing, a careful baring of flesh. Carter lay back on the bed, and she crawled on top of him, found his mouth, and started a kiss. She stayed on top of him until he was hard inside of her. Then she steered them so that he would be on top, missionary.

The next morning, Megan wanted to take a pregnancy test. She knew it was too soon, but she wanted to take it anyway. The night had been fine, even good, but she wanted it to have been *effective*. She took a test, and it was

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negative. Carter said nothing. They knew the result was meaningless as far as actual pregnancy was concerned, but the result did have meaning: they would have to do it again tonight. And the next night. Soon the illusion that they were having sex because they wanted to or because it felt good faded. They were having sex for their daughter. For Susan's granddaughter. They had an obligation, a duty, and they would fulfill it. A strange but familiar feeling, a guilt like the guilt she had felt when she first learned to masturbate, accompanied each tingle of pleasure. Every orgasm brought the horror of the truth closer to breaking their insulated bubble of sadness and slick logic.

Carter was aware; he might even have felt something like what Megan felt. He made references to the well-established link between sex and death, to the French habit of calling an orgasm a *petite mort*, and he tried to laugh at his own cleverness. The laughter twisted Megan's stomach, made her want to vomit obscenities. More and more Megan found herself closing her eyes while Carter was on top of her. She closed them and let her mind go anywhere but the bedroom, trying to avoid pleasure. Carter's grunts and moans followed her into her mental darkness like cawing crows, pecking reminders of the act.

"Was that—was that *good* for you?" she asked.

Carter sat on the edge of the bed with his back to her. His bare shoulders were slumped, rising and falling with quick shallow breaths. She wanted him to keep his back to her. If he turned around, she would have to look away. "I don't know what to say," he said. "Good?" He made a low sound in his throat, more like a hiccup than a laugh. "To be perfectly honest, I can't say that it was what I call *good*. No, what I'm feeling right now isn't *good*. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

His words were lacerating. "No," Megan said, her voice quivering. "I... didn't want to hear anything." A thought blipped in her brain, and her voice became more urgent: "But you did—finish—didn't you?"

Another sardonic hiccup. "As long as the equipment is functioning properly, hundreds of thousands of little soldiers are on a forced march right now."

She regretted the question. It emphasized the way the sex act had lacked

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prelude and afterglow—it was mechanical, purposeful fucking, time to get on top of me and time to roll off and go to sleep. No slow slipping of clothes down arms and legs, no kisses, no going to sleep in each other's arms. A mission with an objective and soldiers and defeats. A sacrifice.

The bubble that had protected them from the horror burst when Megan got her period in late January. “What am I doing wrong? What are you doing wrong?” Both asked and neither answered. Both knew that blame was stupid, but both blamed anyway. There was no more logic, no more reassurance. The mission was established. They had to carry on.

“I can't do it anymore! I can't!” Megan would scream and cry and curl up on the sofa and close her eyes and wish she were far away from the snow and honking taxis and Carter, beautiful, brilliant, terrifying Carter. He haunted her body, a bogeyman with an invitation.

“Then don't. I won't make you. I'm not going to *rape* you, Megan. It's your choice. You can choose whether Caitlin lives or dies.”

Megan sat up and straightened the sofa cushions. “Don't put it on me. It's not fair for you to put it on me. I have too much. You don't have to do anything. It's too much.”

“I don't have to do anything? That's right. I'm *enjoying* myself. I'm having the time of my fucking life. Do you have any idea what it's *like* for me? You just have to lie there, I have to trick myself into thinking I'm doing something I want to do. Maybe this would have been easy ten years ago, but now I feel like I'm thirty years older than I am. Do you realize that I have to *try* to get an erection? That I close my eyes and go into memories—not just other women but *you* when you *were* another woman—hoping that my body will react like a man? Oh, it's a fucking *joy*, let me tell you! Clenching every muscle in the hope that I'll come soon so I don't have to keep pumping away at this—”

“STOP IT! I, I....” She had been unfair. She knew that. “I didn't mean that it was *easy* for you. There's nothing *easy* about any of this.” She reached for the box of tissues on the end table. She blew her nose and watched while Carter cooled down. “What I meant was that it's not fair for you to say it's up to me whether Caitlin lives or dies. It's not up to me. It's not my fault.” She thought of an argument worthy of Carter: hadn't kings punished and

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even executed their wives for failing to conceive? Hadn't biological science brought us past such pseudo-medical misogyny? She didn't say it. That sort of argument worked on her but didn't faze him at all. "I'm scared, Carter. I'm scared I won't get pregnant, and I'm scared that I will. Being pregnant is hard enough without... without..." She dissolved.

"There, there," Carter said. "I'm sorry I yelled. I—it's hard for both of us. But it's harder for you. I know that." When the tears stopped, the tenderness vanished.

They took a week and a half off from their obligation. They ate their dinners in silence. For the first few days, they slept on opposite edges of the bed. Then Carter said he wanted to sleep on the sofa until the next attempt. He asked her permission. She gave it. When the time came to try again, Carter asked whether she'd like to wait one more day. "No," she said. "Do it now. The more... now... the less..." Carter nodded.

Two days later, Megan made a stop on the way home from work at one of the few easily accessible sex shops that remained in the city. The neon lights and rotating displays bewildered her. She had never been a prude, but she had rarely been inside such places, and she had never wanted to use such things. The few remaining movies on sale were shockingly expensive, and they seemed highly specialized. She realized that she had no idea what Carter might like.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" The word "ma'am" sounded funny coming from the scrawny young man in a cap and denim shirt who had left the front counter to attend her. He must have looked at her, at her neat brown ponytail, her bright fuzzy sweater, and her conservative blue pants, and he must have thought she was either lost or insane. She hesitated, but she ended up saying yes, please, and she explained that she was looking for a movie for a man she knew, a sort of gag gift that he would nevertheless enjoy. "Do you plan to, um, enjoy it with him?" No, she had no use for such things. Well then, the young man said, in his general experience both professional and personal he found wisdom in recommending something with a solid basis in girl-on-girl action. Take this movie, for instance; there're these three girls in a sorority house who—Thank you, I'll take it.

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“I brought you something,” Megan said as she set the nondescript brown bag on the kitchen table. She tried to smile, to achieve a look of affection.

Carter was chopping tomatoes for a sauce. He set down the knife and crossed to the table. “Oh really? Hmm. Funny things come in little brown paper bags.” He took out the newly purchased copy of *Sisterhood of Sin*. His face fell. “What the Hell is this?”

Megan concentrated on keeping her smile. “I thought you might like it. I know—I know I don’t really turn you on anymore.”

Carter shook his head. “This is a trap, right? My wife wants me to watch porn. This *can’t* be for real. Megan, *darling*,” he stopped, accentuating the falseness of the word, “it seems like you’re really fishing here. You’re still pretty, Megan. The problem is me, not you. The problem is the situation. I don’t need a porno movie. I just need you. Blah, blah, blah. Is that what you wanted?”

Her smile held. “No need to get hostile,” she said, searching for the tone of voice she knew would remind Carter of her mother. “You’re always telling me about the reality of our situation. The reality about Caitlin, the reality of our obligation, et cetera. Well, here’s a reality. I’m not turning you on. We need you to be turned on. So maybe this will work. I’m not trying to insult you. I’m certainly not trying to offend your manhood.” She glanced down at the crotch of Carter’s jeans and made her smile broaden. “In fact, I think you’ve done remarkably well in this situation.”

“But?”

Megan wasn’t sure whether Carter was annoyed or amused. She didn’t know which she wanted him to be. “But the reality is that *Sisterhood of Sin* might make things a whole lot easier for you. I’m not playing mind games with you. I thought about suggesting that you go buy something like this for yourself, or at least try hooking the computer up to the TV, but I thought *that* really would have been too much of a game. So, I went to get it for you, to prove I’m sincere. I’ll put it in the machine and press play if you want. But that’s all I can do.” She paused, looking at his face. A line came to her: *I’m not the one looking for reassurance here*. But she didn’t say it. She had said enough.

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“The reality of the situation,” Carter said. “Do you want to watch it now, or do you want to have dinner first?”

Megan sustained the bickering for a while, enjoying its relative lightness, but her mind stuck on that word, *reality*. She thought about what Carter said about forcing your will on the world, about bending the rules of the real. Carter’s book and Carter himself both had such interesting ways of talking about the *phenomena of the will*. Though their task, their ritual, might seem supernatural, Carter said it was actually another sort of nature, a reality with different rules, rules that you can often, but not always, make yourself. Carter and his book didn’t use words like *witchcraft* or *magic*. Too hokey, too parochial, too unreal. The reality of the situation, however, was that the situation was unreal. It was hokey. It was *Sisterhood of Sin*.

The movie did what it was supposed to do.

In the early months, Megan and Carter had been at Caitlin’s bedside every moment that they could. A counselor at the specialized hospital told them that, considering the long-term nature of their daughter’s illness, they should be ready for reality to intrude on what they might consider their parental ideals. Long hospital visits simply don’t work in most people’s busy daily schedules. They had to keep to as many of their routines as they could; letting Caitlin’s illness take over and destroy their lives would decrease their ability to be there in the ways that their daughter really needed them. There was nothing wrong with visiting every day or as much as they could, but sometimes as much as they could might not *be* every day. It might help, the counselor said, to think of the hospital as sort of like summer camp. There are people around all the time to look after her needs and to give her affection. It’s hard to accept that you alone can’t meet all your child’s needs, but in a case like Caitlin’s, it’s something you’ll have to do.

Megan accepted it, but for a year she kept going to the hospital as much as her emotional exhaustion would allow, not every day but most. The counselor warned that her work would suffer, but she wasn’t too concerned about her work. The work she did at her mother’s foundation was not trivial, but in some ways it was an excuse for her mother to give her an allowance. The job paid for the apartment and the utilities and the other day-to-day

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things that Carter's academic fellowship couldn't cover. No matter what happened, Susan made clear that she would pay for Caitlin's medical bills. "You will not worry about money," Susan said. "I won't allow it. I admire your independence, but I will not tolerate fool-headed stubbornness." So, Megan kept going to the hospital, and her work suffered.

Even after the first official failure of Megan and Carter's mission, Megan kept up her visiting routine. Going home was sometimes intolerable—she tried to view the hospital and her chats with her drugged little girl as escapes from the horror of what she and her husband were planning. At first her efforts worked, but eventually they backfired. One night when Megan was looking at Caitlin, she thought about what she would have to do to save her daughter's life, and her face started to burn. Megan's love for the girl never wavered—without love there was no point to any of it—but looking at her daughter made her want to scream, made her want to hit something. The illness that was wasting her daughter's face would devour more lives than one. It would eat the life of the baby Megan was trying to conceive. It would consume her own life and maybe Carter's, too. She left the hospital room quickly, not looking back at the quiet bed.

Megan told herself that, once she conceived, she would only have to keep her health and sanity for forty weeks. Then she could have a complete breakdown, run away, or die. She could do anything once her daughter was okay. The object of the mission was not to bring their family back together, not to make things like they used to be. It was to make sure Caitlin lived, nothing more. She would do that, and that would be enough. She didn't have to look at that wasted face, not now. As February waned, Megan left her office after dark, and she did not go to the hospital. She dreaded going home to face Carter again, but that was the only thing she was obliged to do.

After another premature pregnancy test, Megan's period came again. This time, there was no fighting, no recrimination. Megan told Carter, and Carter took out the calendar they kept in their nightstand drawer. They planned their hiatus, and they planned the next attempt. No permission asked, no explanation needed: Carter slept on the sofa.

In late March, Megan started to feel something. She didn't tell Carter. It

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wasn't anything that involved evidence—there were no symptoms yet. She just felt different, and she knew. Carter watched the calendar as closely as she did, but he didn't ask any questions on the day she expected to get her period. He was patient. He said something about how long couples have to try sometimes, about how lucky they would be if it had worked this time. Megan didn't take a test that day or the next. On the third day, she took out one of the tests from under the bathroom sink. She read the instructions even though she had memorized them. She followed them precisely, careful to observe the exact amount of time the instructions indicated. *Lucky*, Megan thought. The forty weeks had already begun.

She hadn't been able to hide what she was doing from Carter. She came out to the living room where he sat upright on the sofa, his back stiff, his hands in his lap. Megan looked at his hands. They did not shake.

Their eyes met. Megan nodded, and Carter stood. He looked perplexed for a moment before he started walking toward her. She raised her hand to stop him. They stood in the center of the room, four feet away from one another. "I'm pregnant," Megan said. "Never touch me again."