Chapter 1

I Think You Wrapped the Wrong Book

You go to your daughter’s house to return a pie plate. Forty minutes later you’re a grandmother, and the pie plate is still in your car.

Kate opens the door with wet hair and one earring in. “Mom, good, you’re here.”

“You said ten.”

“I know. I’ve been ready since eight.”

You look at the ear without an earring. She touches it. “Well, emotionally.”

In the kitchen, her husband, Sam, is making coffee. Your husband, Ray, follows the smell to his usual chair. There are four cinnamon rolls on a tray and a gift at your place, wrapped in the paper Kate bought for Christmas three years ago. She’s turned it inside out. One corner has lifted enough for a small red reindeer to look out at you.

“What’s this for?”

“Open it.”

“It’s not my birthday.”

“Mom.”

You open it. A book. So, You're a Grandma. Who Gets to Pick the Name?

You turn it over. You know Sam's mother has a birthday coming up. Joan likes a funny book.

"Honey, I think this is for your mother-in-law."

"It is," Kate says. "She's getting one, too."

She reaches into the pocket of her sweatshirt and slides a white plastic stick across the table. It stops against your coffee cup. There's an actual word on the little screen. They've taken all the guesswork out of this since you last sat on the edge of a bathtub holding one of these things with a trembling hand.

You look up at Kate.

"Is that why you wouldn't split a beer with me on Tuesday?"

Of all the things you thought you'd say.

Kate starts laughing. Then her chin does that little sideways pull it's done since she was a kid trying to get through a piano recital with a splinter in her thumb. You get up so fast your chair catches on the rug. She comes the rest of the way around the table and folds herself into you. Her wet hair leaves a cold patch on your neck.

Behind you, Ray says, "Oh."

Just that. A quiet, astonished oh from a man who supplied running commentary the entire time he replaced your garbage disposal.

You hold on to your daughter. After a while you can feel her laughing again.

“Mom. Your glasses.”

You’ve hugged her with your reading glasses in your hand. The earpiece has gone down the back of her sweatshirt. The two of you have to perform a small, undignified maneuver to get loose.

Sam goes to retrieve the phone he propped against the fruit bowl. “I wanted to get your faces.”

He plays the video back. The camera has slipped. For two minutes and eleven seconds, the chief witness to this announcement is a ceramic sugar bowl shaped like a chicken.

On the recording you hear Kate say She’s getting one, too. Then your question about the beer. There’s the scrape of your chair, Kate’s laugh, and Ray’s little oh.

“Delete that and we’ll do it again,” Sam offers.

From his chair Ray says, “Send me the chicken.”

You sit back down. Kate tells you what she knows. It’s early. They’ve told you first because Joan and her husband are out of town until Sunday. Sam has the other book hidden on top of the refrigerator inside a

cake carrier, the only place, he says, that his mother would never ask him to look for anything.

You have questions. Dozens. Some of them are none of your business, a fact you discover a gratifying half second before asking them. You settle on, “How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good. Tired. I keep getting mad at the laundry.”

“What did it do?”

“Needed doing. Again.”

She tears a cinnamon roll in half. She’s hardly touched hers. Yours has disappeared, although you have no memory of eating it.

“We want to keep it just family for a couple of weeks,” she says. “Can you do that?”

“Of course.”

She looks at Ray.

He has the book open in his lap. “Linda, did you know you’re supposed to pick a name?”

“Ray, I’ve had the job eight minutes.”

Kate comes out to the driveway when it’s time to go. You remember the pie plate and lift it off the back seat. There’s a circle in the upholstery where it’s been riding around for the better part of a week.

“I practiced telling you,” she says, taking it from you. “In the shower this morning. In my version you said something really beautiful.”

“I had something beautiful ready.”

“Did you?”

“No. But give me the drive home.”

She leans in the car window to kiss her father. He puts one hand against the side of her head. When she was small, he could cover that whole soft head with the palm of his hand. You remember him looking at his own thumb afterward, impressed by the scale of what had happened.

On the way home he turns down the radio. “You think we still have the little wooden chair?”

You know the one. It’s in the basement behind the card table. Kate used to back up to it from several feet away, bent almost double, determined to sit down before she got there.

“Probably.”

“Needs a felt pad on one leg.”

At home, you set the book on the kitchen counter. A text comes in from Kate.

Did you think of the beautiful thing yet?

You type three different answers. All of them sound like they came printed on the inside of something.