

T H E
A L M O S T
S I S T E R S

J O S H I L Y N
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MY SON, DIGBY, began at exactly 3:02 in the morning on the first Friday in June. I don't mean his conception or his birth. I mean the moment he began for me, which happened between those two larger events. It was a start so small I almost didn't notice. I was very, very busy panicking about my job.

I'd finished penciling and inking a limited series for DC Comics, the last contract standing between me and the prequel to my own graphic novel, *Violence in Violet*. Every word and every line of *Violence in Violet* had been written and penciled and lettered and inked and colored by me. I was proud as hell of it, but I hadn't continued it as a series. I couldn't. *V in V* ended in a full apocalypse. Literally nothing could happen next in Violence's world, because there *was* no next. Everything was over, and it stayed over until Dark Horse Comics came to me with the offer for a prequel. They wanted Violence's origin story.

Every superbeing has one. Peter Parker gets bitten by a radioactive spider, Bruce Banner is caught in a blast of gamma radiation. Dark Horse wanted the story of how Violence came to be.

I said yes near instantly, excited at the prospect. It was a backdoor route into my own invented world, the chance to work with my own characters again. For the first time as a professional, I'd have full creative control over the script as well as the

art. I was thrilled, even. Right up until I actually had to do it.

I loved Violence—as much as anyone can love a sharp-toothed, purple, vigilante cannibal—but I'd never explained what she was or where she came from, even to myself. She was simply a busty force with crazy eyes and silver thigh boots, acting out a bloody revenge fantasy that spoke to anyone who'd ever had their heart jerked out and stomped flat. Now I had to know how she began. I'd signed a paper promising I'd know, and comic-book artists don't miss deadlines.

I always got my best ideas at bedtime, drifting in and out of sleep, the membrane between my conscious mind and the black and salty marshes of my undermind grown thin and permeable. In my industry, pictures shaped story, and pictures were my jumping-off point. I closed my eyes and waited for colors that had no name to splash into shapes on my inner eyelids, forming images that would become the panels. But I couldn't fall into that deep green swampland of near sleep where all the best ideas were born. When I closed my eyes, all I saw was my deadline. It felt like it was coming way too fast. Coming *at* me, even, and with bad intentions.

I thumped my pillow and rolled onto my side, and there he was. He started. Digby.

I knew he existed before that middle-of-the-night in June, of course. Intellectually speaking. I'd had a small, almost casual suspicion back in March, when my period pulled a no-show. That was a couple weeks after I'd been a featured artist at a comic-book convention in Atlanta and that whole debacle had happened with a Batman. So, technically speaking, it was possible. Barely.

But I was thirty-eight years old, not some hyperfertile twenty-something who could catch pregnant like it was a cold. *Skips and late starts are my new normal*, I told myself when I hit ten days late. I had to stop by CVS for razors anyway. I threw a

Coke and a pregnancy test into my basket. I drank the first on the way home, where I used the second.

I leaned against the sink, waiting out the timer. The test itself was resting on the back of the toilet, in plain sight, on top of a tissue. I didn't peek, though. I kept my gaze trained on the pair of steampunk fishes I'd hung up on the wall over the tub. A local artist had made them out of "found objects," which was art-fart talk for trash. Chipped and rusty gears, nails, springs, and bits of broken tools had found a second life as fishes on my wall. I'd always liked them, but now it felt like they were staring back at me. They had very round eyes made from bits of vintage telescopes and fat rubber-tubing mouths that turned down.

"Oh, shut up," I told them. I'd never realized that fish were so judgmental.

Two minutes later I was looking at a pink plus sign.

I stood there squinting as if my eyes had gone wonky and were seeing wrong. I was in the outsize master bathroom that, along with the skylight studio upstairs, had made me fall in love with my funky Georgian house. Now the room seemed cavernous; if I yelled, it might echo. The test's pink packaging looked frivolous sitting on my sink, much too silly to be the bearer of real tidings.

I didn't want to go to my regular lady-parts doc, as if I had a UTI or needed to schedule a Pap smear. Instead I called my friend Margot Phan.

"Can you give me an emergency appointment? Now?" I asked. She and her husband had been in my tight-knit clot of Tuesday gamers for twelve years now, but I'd never been to see her as a doctor. She was a pediatrician.

"My waiting room is stuffed with snot-filled toddlers. I'm on yellow alert here, Leia," she told me.

"I'm past yellow. This is a big, fat, blaring red," I told her. "You see teenage girls, right? You can check for if I'm preg-

nant?”

“Oh, shit!” said Margot. “Batman? Are you kidding me? Come right now.”

Margot installed me in a tiny exam room with puffy cartoon forest animals all over the wallpaper. She did another pee test, which was positive, and then at my insistence took the world’s most awkward look at my cervix.

“Leia, honey. You are knocked up,” she told me.

“All the way up?” I asked, even though Margot was one of my closest friends. She wouldn’t screw with me on something medical. But this still felt like some elaborate prank, as if she were about to pop up between my thighs while my feet were in the stirrups, holding a waffle iron and saying, *Look what I found!* “Maybe you should do a blood test?”

“That would be gratuitous. Much like this,” Margot said, standing and heading for the door. I sat up, clutching the sheet around me. “Get dressed and then come to my office, okay? Let’s talk. You’re not in this alone.”

I was so gobsmacked that for a second I thought she meant that I had *Batman* on my side. The real thing. Not a one-shot superhero in an Etsy cowl named Matt or Mark. Or Marcus. I couldn’t quite remember.

I did remember that he was from someplace that ended in an *a*. Florida? India? Maybe Canada, like the beer we’d drunk in between tequila shots. He was taller than me, but who wasn’t? He might have been genuinely funny; he’d certainly seemed funny at the time. He was black—I was pretty definite on that—and his smile, his jawline, had been absolutely beautiful. At some point he must have taken off his pointy-eared iconic mask, because I had a fuzzy memory of oversize brown eyes, slow-blinking and shy, with a thick fringe of lashes. They made his whole face sweeter than the cocky smile had led me to expect.

I also remembered that he loved *Violence in Violet*. He'd recognized me at the hotel bar and came over to describe all his favorite panels. He'd noticed the birds and little animals I'd hidden here and there in the artwork, disguised as shadows or curls of Violence's hair. He'd asked when the prequel would be published, saying he couldn't wait to get his hands on it. His admiration had been balm, and I had needed balm. Earlier that day I'd gotten so damn burned. Plus, tequila never was the handmaiden of good decisions. I'd asked him up to my room.

We'd started kissing in the elevator, where he'd grabbed fistfuls of my long hair to tip my face back in a way I liked so much. I remembered my hands working up under his chest piece, seeking warm and living skin. I remembered his naked body sprawled across my hotel carpet, me naked, too, hops and agave leaking out our very pores, rolling, me on top now with my head thrown back—had I put on his Batman cowl and cape?

Yes. Yes I had, I remembered with a whole-body shame flush. I'd worn them both, laughing like an Arkham-level maniac astride him.

In the morning I was dog-sick and alone. He'd left a note on the pillow—*You're amazing. Can't wait for the prequel*—and a phone number with an area code that for sure was not Virginia. It was probably fake, and anyway, I was flying home to Norfolk in a couple of hours. I couldn't call and try to un-one-night-stand him with some legit dating. I'd thrown the note away, and with it any chance I had of finding him. Batman wasn't going to be a factor.

I got dressed, but I didn't go to Margot's office. I sat staring at a wall covered with smiling rabbits and baby deer in cotton candy colors. The raccoons all looked so smug, like they were laughing at me.

And why not? Unplanned pregnancy is tragic when the mom is a kid herself, but at my age some elements of comedy crept

in. Shouldn't I by now know better than to drag an anonymous Batman back to my room by his utility belt? Shouldn't I at the very least understand the proper workings of a condom? People might not say it to me, but they'd say it to each other. They would think it at me, really loud.

And my parents! I dropped my face into my hands, cringing at the thought of their reaction. They were suburban Methodists, both originally from very small towns, the poster couple for conventional. I could picture my mother tutting and hand-wringing, while my stepdad, Keith, stood awkwardly behind her, trying to give me money. Plus, telling Keith was tantamount to telling Rachel, and that would be the worst.

My stepsister had never had a fender bender, much less an accident involving reproduction. She had made herself a family in perfect order, as if it were as simple as a playground song: *First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Rachel with a baby carriage*. I couldn't even get step one right.

The last thing I wanted was for Rachel to know that I had fetched up pregnant. She would be so irritatingly sorry for me. She would make excuses for me to our parents. *We can't blame Leia*, I could hear her saying. *She must be so lonely. Otherwise she'd never have engaged in such a desperate, tawdry incident with an unfindable Batman*. And the worst part was, she would genuinely be trying to help me. Rachel always helped me, sometimes so relentlessly that I wished I had a safe word.

There was a quick tap at the door, and Margot stuck her head back in.

"Do you have your pants on? You've been in here a while," she said.

Behind her, through the open doorway, I could hear children playing in the waiting room. Little piping voices. The bang of plastic toys and thumpy feet. I had barreled through that crowd of small, sniffing humans and their mothers on my way in. It

was all mothers, though presumably each child had a father. Someplace. I had barely noticed the children, eager to get back here and let Margot correct the home kit's obvious mistake. But I heard them now.

Through the thin wall, in the room next door, a baby burst into a noisy squalling, rich with outrage. My head tilted toward the sound.

"What's wrong with the baby?" I asked.

Margot shrugged, tucking the ends of her jet-black bob behind her ears. "Poor little 'roo, he's getting vaccinations."

She came all the way in to close the door, but I could still hear him. He sounded so affronted. Thirty seconds ago he'd been as innocent as the pink rabbits on the wallpaper. He hadn't even known that things could hurt. Someone should have warned him that the world had jabby things in it and that adults would stick them in his blameless thighs. On purpose.

But even as I thought it, he began to quiet. He must be in his mother's arms, being bobbed and soothed, already forgetting. A real, live human baby. I put one hand on my belly. It felt soft, a little rounder than I would have liked, no different from usual. Yet inside, secretly, it was not the same. In the mortifying shock of being pregnant, I hadn't thought about getting a baby. But that was pregnancy's endgame, after all.

"It's going to be okay, you know," Margot promised. She sat down beside me and put her arm over my shoulders.

"It's so weird to think that sex actually works," I said.

"Reproduction" was a high-school-textbook word. It was like photosynthesis or oxidation, just another process that I'd had to memorize to pass biology. Now here was biology, being true and relevant, working as intended in the darkness at the center of my body. If all went well, a whole and separate person would enter the world. A tiny person, made inside myself. My person. My son or daughter.

“You want to talk about your options?” Margot asked, but I was already shaking my head back and forth.

“I’m thirty-eight years old, Margot,” I answered, slow and serious. “Aren’t I running out of options?”

Margot was my friend. I could see her wanting to tell me that it wasn’t true. But she was also a doctor, and I was dead single and a year and change away from forty. I’d walked away from every man I might have married. No, I’d run. The playground song in my head went, *First comes love, then comes hideous betrayal, then comes endless regret requiring expensive therapy*. It was a terrible song. It didn’t even rhyme. But it was mine, and I hadn’t made a family, even though I’d wanted one.

I still did. I wanted to fall in love, marry a dork like me, make more dorks. I wanted game nights, summer nerdcations to Ren fairs and Orlando, a better reason than my own sweet tooth for baking Yoda cupcakes. I had imagined what it would be like to leap in and make a life with someone. Make babies that were a blend of us. It must be a kind of magic, to create a kid with my husband’s nose and my own deep-set eyes.

This kid, though? He might be born with Batman’s nose, but how would I know? I couldn’t remember Batman’s nose. This kid would be biracial; he could get my deep-set eyes, but we still wouldn’t look like family to my racist neighbor. Or to anybody’s racist neighbor, actually, and the world was full of them. I’d be raising him all alone, too. I wasn’t exactly living the dream here.

It didn’t matter. No matter how embarrassing the origin story, no matter the potential hazards, a tiny piece of family had crash-landed in my uterus.

“I’m making a baby,” I told Margot, and I sounded terrified.

Even so, underneath the shake in my voice, I heard joy. Margot must have heard it, too, because she grinned and hugged me tighter.

“Yeah, you are, Mama,” she said, and wrote me a prescription for prenatals.

For the first few months, I kept it a secret between me and Margot and my ob-gyn. I bought a book called *Late Bloomers: The Pregnancy Handbook for Women Over 35*, and it advised me not to tell, at least until I’d gotten through the first trimester. That made sense to me, and not only because telling everyone would be uncomfortable and I actively dreaded telling Rachel. I had another, deeper reason. At my age pregnancy was classified as high-risk. I had extra doctor appointments and tests, and in my heart I didn’t trust that it would stick. This didn’t feel like something I would get to have.

So I worked, I hung out with my friends, I put out cat food for the wary stray who lived in my backyard. I went to church and hosted Tuesday game nights. I took out the recycling. It all felt exactly the same as the thousands of times I’d done this stuff unpregnant. I missed having a glass of wine with dinner, but Night of the Bat aside, I wasn’t a big drinker. I wasn’t nauseous or any moodier than usual. I didn’t find myself salting my ice cream or eating sidewalk chalk. Another few weeks and I had to move into my fat jeans, but that was no big deal—it happened every Christmas.

At my fourth appointment, my ob-gyn took some of my blood, and the fetal platelets told us my baby was genetically sound and definitely a boy. I was officially in my second trimester.

Now, *Late Bloomers* said, shit got real. Maybe not in those exact words, but the book and common sense agreed that it was time to make the guest room over into a nursery, buy some onesies and a Diaper Genie, and hey, maybe mention I was pregnant to my family and friends. I didn’t. I was carrying a viable, whole, human boy, but he still seemed so intangible. He was like a drawing after I had the idea but before my pencil moved along the paper.

I didn't even tell my grandmother, my only living relative on my father's side. She was seven hundred miles away, down in Birchville, Alabama, busy making sure her pansy bed was immaculate and disapproving of young people and her own racist neighbor. She would have been the perfect test case, both because she'd never rat me out to Mom and Keith and Rachel and because she loved me so damn much.

I reminded her of my dad, who had been short and dark-haired and built on the thick side, just like me. And just like me he had been a haunter of used-book stores, an eater of Easy Cheese, a roller of many-sided dice. In my favorite picture, the one I kept in my purse, he was wearing Spock ears. The dork was strong in him. He had picked baby names when I was just a bump inside my mother, but he never got to see if I was a Leia or a Solo. He was killed by a drunk driver three weeks before I was born, Birchie's crowning sorrow in a hard life full of lesser ones.

She deserved to know she'd soon have a great-grandbaby, but even though I called her at least twice a week, I didn't bring it up. Childbirth—the kind with a child at the end of it—seemed improbable and distant. Telling Birchie especially felt like promising something I could not deliver. I didn't believe in it—in Digby—until that first Friday in June, 3:02 A.M., when I was riding out insomnia and failing to come up with even one idea for the prequel to *Violence in Violet*.

Maybe because I'd written *V in V* so long ago? I'd begun sketching *Violence* two decades earlier, when I was a senior in high school—practically a fetus myself. Those drawings got me into Savannah College of Art and Design, and the completed graphic novel had been my senior project for my B.F.A. in sequential art.

I'd taken the finished graphic novel to a small con in Memphis, where I showed it to a guy who hired artists for DC. He

liked my shading, and he offered me a contract. I'd put *V in V* in a box and gone to work, parlaying that first job into a freelance career. I was good, and I got better, and I never missed a deadline. Over the years I'd worked for every major publisher in the business, penciling and inking characters from Ant-Man all the way to General Zod.

About six years ago, while updating my website, I'd scanned and uploaded the opening pages of *V in V*. It was mostly a whim—an easy way to pad my content. The first month it got a couple hundred downloads. The next a couple thousand. By the summer's end, I had more than twenty thousand shares and linkbacks, and the traffic was crashing my server. My social media blew up with requests for the whole story.

I self-published it, making a print-on-demand paper edition and an e-book, and I sold more than a hundred thousand copies in the first year alone. *V in V* was still selling, and now, instead of sitting on panels, I was paid to be a featured speaker at comic-book and fantasy/sci-fi conventions all over the country. When I penciled for other series, my name on the cover boosted sales, and Dark Horse had made a truly motivating offer for this prequel. The only problem was, I had zero ideas.

I thumped my pillow, restless, trying to focus inward on my sharp-toothed antiheroine. How had Violence learned to fly, to bite, to wield her clever, crooked knives? When I started the graphic novel, twenty years ago, I'd concentrated on Violet, the heartbroken girl that Violence comes to protect. Violet was based on me in a lot of ways, so I knew her character down to the bone. Violence had been only a means to an end. To a lot of very bloody ends, actually, and I'd never thought past that. It was an absence in the book, and now I had to fill it. I sank deep into the dark inside my body, waiting to see a story begin, waiting for colors and shapes to come and show me. I was almost dozing, but not quite, and I turned onto my side.

When I came to rest, a smallness deep within me kept on turning. I felt it. It was a silent trill of something like a sound. It was the smallest key, spinning in a lock I'd never known was present at my center.

The movement was in me, but it wasn't me. It was another little something, a someone, willfully choosing to flex his flippery future arms, or whatever it was he had by then. It was a choice, but I hadn't made it. It was inside me, and mine, but I did not control it.

Right exactly then, my son started. He became real in ways he hadn't been five seconds before. Much realer than he had been almost four months back, when I was cleaning up my hotel room in Atlanta, finding only one used condom but remembering two sexes. A second condom had been on the bedside table, speaking to good intentions but still mint-in-package. Now I could feel him making small decisions inside me, and I already knew his name. It was a nerd reference so obscure that nobody but me would ever get it.

"Hello, Digby? Is that you?" I asked him, listening in that same odd, inward way for a sound that was not a sound.

It came again, as if in response. Alien and tiny, unfeeleable under any other circumstances.

"Oh, my stars and garters, you're really there," I told him, though *Late Bloomers* said he was a few weeks away from hearing yet.

Quickening, my book had called it, and it was the perfect word, because when he quickened, my whole life sped up, too. I was pregnant, and this baby didn't even have a crib. Right now he had only me. I had to tell people. My Tuesday gamers ran a meal train every time someone had a baby or got sick. I'd made umpty casseroles and quarts of soup over the years; now I would need a turn.

Most important, I had to tell my family. Fast. My parents

needed time to get over their initial shock before the baby came, so Mom could teach me to breast-feed and Keith could show me how to properly install the car seat that I didn't own yet.

Every Sunday afternoon Rachel hosted a family luncheon after church. I'd sat through more than a dozen since I'd gotten pregnant, eating shrimp scampi or beef medallions for two and keeping my mouth shut. This Sunday, I resolved, I would simply say it.

Something sure smells good, and hey, I'm spawning. Boom and done.

I'd pre-forgive Mom and Keith for any less-than-ideal initial reactions. They were going to be so embarrassed. I'd bright-side it for them, reassure them that I was healthy and happy and remind them that they were finally getting a second grandkid. In the end they weren't going to love Digby any less for being fatherless or browner than they were. But the end seemed a long way off.

Rachel would back me up, but the minute we were alone, I'd get an earful from her, too. She'd be pissed at me for setting a bad example for her thirteen-year-old daughter. So would her husband, probably, but screw him. Of every jackass currently stomping around on this blue planet, Jake Jacoby was the last one who was allowed to have an opinion about me.

I'd eat whatever crap they needed to shovel at me, and then they'd rally around me. Around us. They had to, especially with Rachel there to make them. Rachel could rally so fast and so hard, and I had to be ready for that, too. Before Sunday I needed to go online and order everything I wanted for a bright blue Superman-themed nursery, before Rachel could swoop in with trendy neutrals and distressed wood and those horrifying Swedish animals from GOOP.

Sunday night I'd call my grandmother down in Alabama. If Birchie had been any other small-town ninety-year-old south-

ern lady, the thought of telling her might make me cringe, but she was her singular self. Sure, Birchie lived stiffly, and by rules, but they were rules of her own making. That call seemed more like a reward I'd earn by weathering the storm of telling Rachel and my parents.

When I told Birchie about Digby, I knew that my prim grandmother would be . . . joyful. Joyful that she and I would not be the last of the Birch line after all. Joyful in the same soaring, secret way that I was—and right now? Feeling him move? I was practically giddy with it. I lay in the darkness, reveling in the flutter of this tiny, late, imperfectly got piece of what I'd always wanted.

Now I could hardly wait to call her. She had lived a version of this story: a single son, born when she was past thirty, that she had raised alone. Granted, she'd been a young widow. She'd had proper husband there for the conception part. Even so, Birchie would understand better than anyone else how, in the wake of my son's beginning, I felt like my life was beginning, too.

I had no way to know that seven hundred miles south of me, the grandmother I longed to tell was coming to her end.