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Opening Extract from...

Sing You Home

Written by Jodi Picoult

Published by Hodder & Stoughton

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JODI PICOULT

Sing You Home

Original music composed and performed by Ellen Wilber
Lyrics by Jodi Picoult

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For Ellen Wilber – Your music has completely enriched my life; your friendship has meant so much to me and my entire family. I'm not sure I can remember which one of us is supposed to be Louise and which one is supposed to be Thelma, but I don't think it matters as long as we're on the road together.

And for Kyle van Leer – From the moment you were born in a hurricane I knew you were going to be one of a kind. I don't think I could possibly be any more proud of you if I tried – not just for who you've become but for the individual you have always been.

Somehow, I know you two won't mind sharing a dedication page.

No man has a natural right to commit aggression on the equal rights of another, and this is all from which the laws ought to restrain him.

– Thomas Jefferson

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Zoe

One sunny, crisp Saturday in September when I was seven years old, I watched my father drop dead. I was playing with my favorite doll on the stone wall that bordered our driveway while he mowed the lawn. One minute he was mowing, and the next, he was facefirst in the grass as the mower propelled itself in slow motion down the hill of our backyard.

I thought at first he was sleeping, or playing a game. But when I crouched beside him on the lawn, his eyes were still open. Damp cut grass stuck to his forehead.

I don't remember calling for my mother, but I must have.

When I think about that day, it is in slow motion. The mower, walking alone. The carton of milk my mother was carrying when she ran outside, which dropped to the tarred driveway. The sound of round vowels as my mother screamed into the phone to give our address to the ambulance.

My mother left me at the neighbor's house while she went to the hospital. The neighbor was an old woman whose couch smelled like pee. She offered me chocolate-covered peppermints that were so old the chocolate had turned white at the edges. When her telephone rang I wandered into the backyard and crawled behind a row of hedges. In the soft mulch, I buried my doll and walked away.

My mother never noticed that it was gone – but then, it barely seemed that she acknowledged my father being gone, either. She never cried. She stood stiff-backed through my father's funeral. She sat across from me at the kitchen table that I still sometimes set with a third place for my father, as we gradually ate our way through chipped beef casserole and mac-and-cheese-and-franks,

sympathy platters from my father's colleagues and neighbors who hoped food could make up for the fact that they didn't know what to say. When a robust, healthy forty-two-year-old dies of a massive heart attack, the grieving family is suddenly contagious. Come too close, and you might catch our bad luck.

Six months after my father died, my mother – still stoic – took his suits and shirts out of the closet they shared and brought them to Goodwill. She asked the liquor store for boxes, and she packed away the biography that he had been reading, which had been on the nightstand all this time; and his pipe, and his coin collection. She did not pack away his Abbott and Costello videos, although she always had told my father that she never really understood what made them funny.

My mother carried these boxes to the attic, a place that seemed to trap cluster flies and heat. On her third trip up, she didn't come back. Instead, what floated downstairs was a silly, fizzy refrain piped through the speakers of an old record player. I could not understand all the words, but it had something to do with a witch doctor telling someone how to win the heart of a girl.

Ooo eee ooo ah ah, ting tang, walla walla, bing bang, I heard. It made a laugh bubble up in my chest, and since I hadn't laughed all that much lately, I hurried to the source.

When I stepped into the attic, I found my mother weeping. 'This record,' she said, playing it over again. 'It made him so happy.'

I knew better than to ask why, then, she was sobbing. Instead, I curled up beside her and listened to the song that had finally given my mother permission to cry.

Every life has a soundtrack.

There is a tune that makes me think of the summer I spent rubbing baby oil on my stomach in pursuit of the perfect tan. There's another that reminds me of tagging along with my father on Sunday mornings to pick up the *New York Times*. There's the song that reminds me of using fake ID to get into a nightclub; and the one that brings back my cousin Isobel's sweet sixteen, where I played Seven Minutes in Heaven with a boy whose breath smelled like tomato soup.

If you ask me, music is the language of memory.

Wanda, the shift nurse at Shady Acres Assisted Living, hands me a visitor pass, although I've been coming to the nursing home for the past year to work with various clients. 'How is he today?' I ask.

'The usual,' Wanda says. 'Swinging from the chandelier and entertaining the masses with a combination of tap dancing and shadow puppets.'

I grin. Mr Docker is in the final throes of dementia. In the twelve months I've been his music therapist, he's interacted with me twice. Most of the time, he sits in his bed or a wheelchair, staring through me, completely unresponsive.

When I tell people I am a music therapist, they think it means I play guitar for people who are in the hospital – that I'm a performer. Actually, I'm more like a physical therapist, except instead of using treadmills and grab bars as tools, I use music. When I tell people *that*, they usually dismiss my job as some New Age BS.

In fact, it's very scientific. In brain scans, music lights up the medial prefrontal cortex and triggers a memory that starts playing in your mind. All of a sudden you can see a place, a person, an incident. The strongest responses to music – the ones that elicit vivid memories – cause the greatest activity on brain scans. It's for this reason that stroke patients can access lyrics before they remember language, why Alzheimer's patients can still remember songs from their youth.

And why I haven't given up on Mr Docker yet.

'Thanks for the warning,' I tell Wanda, and I pick up my duffel, my guitar, and my djembe.

'Put those down,' she insists. 'You're not supposed to be carrying anything heavy.'

'Then I'd better get rid of this,' I say, touching my belly. In my twenty-eighth week, I'm enormous – and I'm also completely lying. I worked way too hard to have this baby to feel like any part of the pregnancy is a burden. I give Wanda a wave and head down the hall to start today's session.

Usually my nursing home clients meet in a group setting, but Mr Docker is a special case. A former CEO of a Fortune 500 company, he now lives in this very chic elder-care facility, and his

daughter Mim contracts my services for weekly sessions. He's just shy of eighty, has a lion's mane of white hair and gnarled hands that apparently used to play a mean jazz piano.

The last time Mr Docker gave any indication that he was aware I shared the same physical space as him was two months ago. I'd been playing my guitar, and he smacked his fist against the handle of his wheelchair twice. I am not sure if he wanted to chime in for good measure or was trying to tell me to stop – but he was in rhythm.

I knock and open the door. 'Mr Docker?' I say. 'It's Zoe. Zoe Baxter. You feel like playing a little music?'

Someone on staff has moved him to an armchair, where he sits looking out the window. Or maybe just through it – he's not focusing on anything. His hands are curled in his lap like lobster claws.

'Right!' I say briskly, trying to maneuver myself around the bed and the television stand and the table with his untouched breakfast. 'What should we sing today?' I wait a beat but am not really expecting an answer. "'You Are My Sunshine'"? I ask. "'Tennessee Waltz'"? I try to extract my guitar from its case in a small space beside the bed, which is not really big enough for my instrument and my pregnancy. Settling the guitar awkwardly on top of my belly, I start to strum a few chords. Then, on second thought, I put it down.

I rummage through the duffel bag for a maraca – I have all sorts of small instruments in there, for opportunities just like this. I gently wedge it into the curl of his hand. 'Just in case you want to join in.' Then I start singing softly. *'Take me out to the ball game; take me out with the . . .'*

The end, I leave hanging. There's a need in all of us to finish a phrase we know, and so I'm hoping to get him to mutter that final *'crowd.'* I glance at Mr Docker, but the maraca remains clenched in his hand, silent.

'Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack; I don't care if I never get back.'

I keep singing as I step in front of him, strumming gently. *'Let me root, root, root for the home team; if they don't win it's a shame. For it's one, two, three—'*

Suddenly Mr Docker's hand comes flying up and the maraca clips me in the mouth. I can taste blood. I'm so surprised I stagger backward, and tears spring to my eyes. I press my sleeve to my cut lip, trying to keep him from seeing that he's hurt me. 'Did I do something to upset you?'

Mr Docker doesn't respond.

The maraca has landed on the pillow of his bed. 'I'm just going to reach behind you, here, and get the instrument,' I say carefully, and as I do, he takes another swing at me. This time I stumble, crashing into the table and overturning his breakfast tray.

'What is going on in here?' Wanda cries, bursting through the door. She looks at me, at the mess on the floor, and then at Mr Docker.

'We're okay,' I tell her. 'Everything's okay.'

Wanda takes a long, pointed look at my belly. 'You sure?'

I nod, and she backs out of the room. This time, I sit gingerly on the edge of the radiator in front of the window. 'Mr Docker,' I ask softly, 'what's wrong?'

When he faces me, his eyes are bright with tears and lucidity. He lets his gaze roam the room – from its institutional curtains to the emergency medical equipment in the cabinet behind the bed to the plastic pitcher of water on the nightstand. 'Everything,' he says tightly.

I think about this man, who once was written up in *Money* and *Fortune*. Who used to command thousands of employees and whose days were spent in a richly paneled corner office with a plush carpet and a leather swivel chair. For a moment, I want to apologize for taking out my guitar, for unlocking his blocked mind with music.

Because there are some things we'd rather forget.

The doll that I buried at a neighbor's house on the day my father died was called Sweet Cindy. I had begged for her the previous Christmas, completely suckered by the television ads that ran on Saturday mornings between cartoons. Sweet Cindy could eat and drink and poop and tell you that she loved you. 'Can she fix a carburetor?' my father had joked, when I showed him my Christmas list. 'Can she clean the bathroom?'

I had a history of treating dolls badly. I cut off my Barbie dolls' hair with fingernail scissors. I decapitated Ken, although in my defense that had been an accident involving a fall from a bicycle basket. But Sweet Cindy I treated like my own baby. I tucked her each night into a crib that was set beside my own bed. I bathed her every day. I pushed her up and down the driveway in a stroller we'd bought at a garage sale.

On the day of my father's death, he'd wanted to go for a bike ride. It was beautiful out; I had just gotten my training wheels removed. But I'd told my father that I was playing with Cindy, and maybe we could go later. 'Sounds like a plan, Zo,' he had said, and he'd started to mow the back lawn, and of course there was no *later*.

If I had never gotten Sweet Cindy for Christmas.

If I'd said yes to my father when he asked.

If I'd been watching him, instead of playing with the doll.

There were a thousand permutations of behavior that, in my mind, could have saved my father's life – and so, although it was too late, I told myself I'd never wanted that stupid doll in the first place, that she was the reason my father wasn't here anymore.

The first time it snowed after my father died, I had a dream that Sweet Cindy was sitting on my bed. Crows had pecked out her blue-marble eyes. She was shivering.

The next day I took a garden spade from the garage and walked to the neighbor's house where I'd buried her. I dug up the snow and the mulch from half of the hedgerow, but the doll was gone. Carried away by a dog, maybe, or a little girl who knew better.

I know it's stupid for a forty-year-old woman to connect a foolish act of grief with four unsuccessful cycles of IVF, two miscarriages, and enough infertility issues to bring down a civilization – but I cannot tell you how many times I've wondered if this is some kind of karmic punishment.

If I hadn't so recklessly abandoned the first baby I ever loved, would I have a real one by now?

By the time my session with Mr Docker ends, his daughter Mim has rushed from her ladies' auxiliary meeting to Shady Acres. 'Are

you sure you didn't get hurt?' she says, looking me over for the hundredth time.

'Yes,' I tell her, although I suspect her concern has more to do with a fear of being sued than with genuine concern for my well-being.

She rummages in her purse and pulls out a fistful of cash. 'Here,' Mim says.

'But you've already paid me for this month—'

'This is a bonus,' she says. 'I'm sure, with the baby and everything, there are expenses.'

It's hush money, I know that, but she's right. However, the expenses surrounding my baby have less to do with car seats and strollers than with Lupron and Follistim injections. After five IVF cycles – both fresh and frozen – we have depleted all of our savings and maxed out our credit cards. I take the money and tuck it into the pocket of my jeans. 'Thank you,' I say, and then I meet her gaze. 'What your father did? I know you don't see it this way, but it's a huge step forward for him. He connected with me.'

'Yeah, right on your jaw,' Wanda mutters.

'He *interacted*,' I correct. 'Maybe in a less than socially appropriate way . . . but still. For a minute, the music got to him. For a minute, he was *here*.'

I can tell Mim doesn't buy this, but that's all right. I have been bitten by an autistic child; I have sobbed beside a little girl dying of brain cancer; I have played in tune with the screams of a child who was burned over eighty percent of his body. This job . . . if it hurts me, I know I am doing it well.

'I'd better go,' I say, picking up my guitar case.

Wanda doesn't glance up from the chart she's writing in. 'See you next week.'

'Actually, you'll see me in about two hours at the baby shower.'

'What baby shower?'

I grin. 'The one I'm not supposed to know about.'

Wanda sighs. 'If your mother asks, you better make sure you tell her I wasn't the one who spilled the beans.'

'Don't worry. I'll act appropriately surprised.'

Mim reaches out her hand toward my protruding belly. 'May I?' I nod. I know some pregnant women think it's an invasion of privacy to have strangers reaching to pat or touch or offer parenting

advice, but I don't mind in the least. I can barely keep myself from rubbing my hands over the baby, from being magnetically drawn to the proof that this time, it is going to work.

'It's a boy,' she announces.

I am thoroughly convinced that I'm carrying a girl. I dream in pink. I wake up with fairy tales caught on my tongue. 'We'll see,' I say.

I've always found it ironic that someone who has trouble getting pregnant begins in vitro fertilization by taking birth control pills. It is all about regulating an irregular cycle, in order to begin an endless alphabet soup of medications: three ampoules each of FSH and hMG – Follistim and Repronex – injected into me twice a day by Max, a man who used to faint at the sight of a needle and who now, after five years, can give me a shot with one hand and pour coffee with the other. Six days after starting the injections, a transvaginal ultrasound measured the size of my ovarian follicles, and a blood test measured my estradiol levels. That led to Antagon, a new medication meant to keep the eggs in the follicles until they were ready. Three days later: another ultrasound and blood test. The amounts of Follistim and Repronex were reduced – one ampoule of each morning and night – and then two days later, another ultrasound and blood test.

One of my follicles measured twenty-one millimeters. One measured twenty millimeters. And one was nineteen millimeters.

At precisely 8:30 p.m. Max injected ten thousand units of hCG into me. Exactly thirty-six hours later, those eggs were retrieved.

Then ICSI – intracytoplasmic sperm injection – was used to fertilize the egg with Max's sperm. And three days later, with Max holding my hand, a vaginal catheter was inserted into me and we watched the embryo transfer on a blinking computer monitor. There, the lining of my uterus looked like sea grass swaying in the current. A little white spark, a star, shot out of the syringe and fell between two blades of grass. We celebrated our potential pregnancy with a shot of progesterone in my butt.

And to think, some people who want to have a baby only need to make love.

My mother is on her computer when I walk into her house, adding information to her recently acquired Facebook profile. DARA WEEKS, her status says, WISHES HER DAUGHTER WOULD FRIEND HER. 'I'm not talking to you,' she says, snippy, 'but your husband called.'

'Max?'

'Do you have more than one?'

'What did he want?'

She shrugs. Ignoring her, I pick up the phone in the kitchen and dial Max's mobile number. 'Why isn't your cell on?' Max asks, as soon as he picks up.

'Yes, honey,' I reply. 'I love you, too.'

In the background I can hear a lawn mower. Max runs a landscaping business. He is busy mowing in the summer, raking in the fall, and snowplowing in the winter. *What do you do during mud season?* I had asked the first time we met.

Wallow, he'd said, smiling.

'I heard you got hurt.'

'Embarrassing news travels fast. Who called you, anyway?'

'I just think . . . I mean, we worked so hard to get to this point.' Max stumbles over the words, but I know what he means.

'You heard Dr Gelman,' I tell him. 'We're in the home stretch.'

It seems ironic that, after all these years of trying, I am the one who is more relaxed about the pregnancy than Max. There were years when I was so superstitious I counted backward from twenty before getting out of bed, or wore the same lucky camisole for a week in an effort to ensure that particular embryo would be the one that actually stuck. But I've never made it this far before, where my ankles are blissfully swollen and my joints ache and I cannot see my feet in the shower. I've never been so pregnant that someone could plan a baby shower.

'I know we need the money, Zoe, but if your clients are violent—'

'Max. Mr Docker is catatonic ninety-nine percent of the time, and my burn victims are usually unconscious. Honestly, this was a fluke. I could just as easily get hurt walking across the street.'

'Then don't cross the road,' Max says. 'When are you coming home?'

I'm sure he knows about the baby shower, but I play along. 'I have to do an assessment of a new client,' I joke. 'Mike Tyson.'

'Very funny. Look, I can't talk right now—'

'You called me—'

'Only because I thought you were doing something stupid—'

'Max,' I say, cutting him off. 'Let's not. Let's just not.' For years, Max and I were told by couples with children how lucky we were; how our relationship had the luxury of being all about us, instead of who was cooking dinner and who was carpooling to Little League. But the flame of romance can be just as effectively doused by dinner conversations that center on estradiol levels and appointment times at the clinic. It is not that Max doesn't do everything right – from massaging my feet to telling me I look beautiful instead of bloated. It's that, lately, even when I am pressed up close against him, I feel like I cannot get close enough to touch him, like he is somewhere else. I have told myself that I'm imagining things. That it's nerves on his part, raging hormones on mine. I just wish I didn't have to keep making excuses.

Not for the first time, I wish I had a girlfriend to confide in. Someone who would nod and say all the right things when I complained about my husband. But my friendships had dwindled as Max and I began to devote ourselves entirely to combating infertility. Some relationships *I'd* ended, because I didn't want to hear a friend talk about her baby's first words, or go to a couple's home for dinner and be confronted with sippy cups and Matchbox cars and stuffed bears – details of a life that eluded me. Other relationships had simply fallen by the wayside, since the only person who really could understand the cyclone of emotions involved in IVF was Max. We'd isolated ourselves, because we were the only pair among our married friends who didn't have kids yet. We'd isolated ourselves, because it hurt less.

I hear him hang up. My mother, I see, has been hanging on every word. 'Is everything all right between you two?'

'I thought you were mad at me.'

'I am.'

'Then how come you're eavesdropping?'

‘It’s not eavesdropping if it’s my phone and my kitchen. What’s wrong with Max?’

‘Nothing.’ I shake my head. ‘I don’t know.’

She schools her features into an expression of open concern. ‘Let’s sit down and unpack this feeling together.’

I roll my eyes. ‘Does that really work with your clients?’

‘You’d be surprised. Most people already know the answers to their problems.’

My mother, for the past four months, has reinvented herself as the owner and sole employee of Mama Knows Best Life Coaching. This profession comes on the heels of her earlier incarnations as a Reiki instructor, a stand-up comedienne, and – for one very uncomfortable summer of my adolescence – a door-to-door saleswoman for her entrepreneurial invention: the Banana Sack (a fitted pink neoprene suit that shimmied over the fruit to keep it from going brown too quickly; unfortunately, it was mistaken repeatedly for a sex toy). By comparison, becoming a life coach is fairly tame.

‘When I was pregnant with you, your father and I fought so much that one day I left him.’

I stare at her. How is it possible that, in the forty years I’ve been alive, I never knew this? ‘Seriously?’

She nods. ‘I packed and told him I was leaving him and I did.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘To the end of the driveway,’ my mother says. ‘I was nine months pregnant; that was the maximum distance I could waddle without feeling as if my uterus was falling out.’

I wince. ‘Do you have to be quite so graphic?’

‘What would you like me to call it, Zoe? A fetal living room?’

‘What happened?’

‘The sun went down, and your father came out with a jacket for me. We sat for a few minutes and we went back inside.’ She shrugs. ‘And then you were born, and whatever it was that we’d been arguing about didn’t seem to matter. All I’m saying is that the past is nothing but a springboard for the future.’

I fold my arms. ‘Have you been sniffing the Windex again?’

‘No, it’s my new tagline. Look.’ My mother’s fingers fly over the keyboard. The best advice she ever gave me was to take a typing

course. I'd fought her furiously. It was in the voc-tech side of my high school and full of kids who were not in my über-academic classes – kids who smoked outside before school, who wore heavy eyeliner and listened to heavier metal. *Are you there to judge people or to type?* she'd asked me. In the end I was one of three girls who got a blue ribbon from the teacher for mastering seventy-five words per minute. Nowadays I use a keyboard, of course, but every time I type up an assessment for one of my clients, I silently thank my mother for being right.

She brings up her business's Facebook page. There's a picture of her on it, and her cheesy tagline. 'You would have *known* that was my new motto if you'd accepted my friend request.'

'Are you seriously going to hold social networking etiquette against me?' I ask.

'All I know is that I carried you for nine months. I fed you, I clothed you, I paid for your college education. Friending me on Facebook seems like a small thing to ask in return.'

'You're my *mother*. You don't have to be my friend.'

She gestures at my belly. 'I just hope that she gives you the same heartache you give me.'

'Why do you even *have* Facebook, anyway?'

'Because it's good for business.'

She has three clients that I know of – none of whom seem perturbed that my mother has no degree in counseling or consulting or anything else you'd want from a motivational coach. One client is a former stay-at-home mother who wants to rejoin the workforce but has no skills beyond making a mean PB&J sandwich and separating lights from darks. One is a twenty-six-year-old guy who recently found his birth mother but is afraid to make contact with her. And the last is a recovering alcoholic who just likes the stability of a meeting every week.

'A life coach should be on the cutting edge. Hip,' my mother says.

'If you were hip, you wouldn't use the word *hip*. You know what I think this is about? The movie we went to last Sunday.'

'I didn't like it. The book's ending was better—'

'No, not that. The girl at the ticket booth asked if you were a senior, and you didn't say another word for the rest of the night.'

She stands up. ‘Do I *look* like a senior, for God’s sake? I color my hair religiously. I have an elliptical machine. I gave up Brian Williams for Jon Stewart.’

I have to give her this – she looks better than most of my friends’ mothers. She has the same poker-straight brown hair and green eyes that I do and the kind of funky, eclectic style that always makes you look twice at someone, wondering if she planned the outfit meticulously or just rummaged in the depths of her closet. ‘Mom,’ I say, ‘you are the youngest sixty-five-year-old I know. You don’t need Facebook to prove it.’

It amazes me that someone – anyone – would pay my mother to be a life coach. I mean, as her daughter, isn’t her advice the very thing I’ve tried to escape? But my mother insists that her clients like the fact that she’s survived a great loss herself; it gives her credibility. She says the vast majority of life coaches are nothing more than good listeners who, every so often, can give a procrastinator a kick in the pants. And really, what are the best credentials for that, outside of being a mother?

I peer over her shoulder. ‘Don’t you think you should mention me on the site?’ I say. ‘On account of the fact that I’m your primary qualification for this job?’

‘Imagine how ridiculous it will look if your name is on the site and there isn’t a link to your profile. But’ – she sighs – ‘that’s only for people who’ve accepted my friend invitation . . .’

‘Oh, for God’s sake.’ I lean down and type, my hands between hers, this baby pressed to her back. I log in to my profile. The live feed that fills the screen contains the thoughts and actions of people I went to high school with or other music therapists or former professors; a former college roommate named Darci I haven’t spoken with in months. *I should call her*, I think, and at the same time I know I won’t. She has twins who are just going to preschool; their smiling faces are her profile photo.

I accept my mother’s pending friend request, even though it feels like a new low in social networking. ‘There,’ I say. ‘Happy?’

‘Very. Now at least I know I’ll be able to see new pictures of my grandchild when I log in.’

‘As opposed to driving a mile to my apartment to see her in person?’

‘It’s the principle, Zoe,’ my mother says. ‘I’m just glad you finally got off your high horse.’

‘No horses,’ I say. ‘I’m just not in the mood to fight until it’s time to leave for my baby shower.’

My mother opens her mouth to respond, then snaps it shut. For a half second, she contemplates going along with the ruse, and, just as quickly, she gives up. ‘Who told you?’

‘I think the pregnancy is bringing out a sixth sense in me,’ I confide.

She considers this, impressed. ‘Really?’

I walk into her kitchen to raid the fridge – there are three tubs of hummus and a bag of carrots, plus various indistinguishable clots in Tupperware containers. ‘Some mornings I wake up and I just know Max is going to say he wants Cap’n Crunch for breakfast. Or I’ll hear the phone ring and I know it’s you before I even pick up.’

‘I used to be able to predict rain when I was pregnant with you,’ my mother says. ‘I was more accurate than the weatherman on the ABC news.’

I dip my finger into the hummus. ‘When I woke up this morning, the whole bedroom smelled like eggplant parmigiana – you know, the really good kind that they make at Bolonisi’s?’

‘That’s where the shower’s being held!’ she gasps, amazed. ‘When did all this start?’

‘About the same time I found a Kinko’s receipt for the invitations in Max’s jacket.’

It takes my mother a moment, and then she starts to laugh. ‘And here I was planning the cruise I was going to take after I won the lottery with your number picks.’

‘Sorry to disappoint you.’

She rubs her hand over my belly. ‘Zoe,’ my mother says, ‘you couldn’t if you tried.’

Some cognitive scientists believe human response to music provides evidence that we are more than just flesh and blood – that we also have souls. Their thinking is as follows:

All reactions to external stimuli can be traced back to an evolutionary rationale. You pull your hand away from fire to avoid

physical harm. You get butterflies before an important speech because the adrenaline running through your veins has caused a physiological fight-or-flight response. But there is no evolutionary context within which people's response to music makes sense – the tapping of a foot, the urge to sing along or get up and dance, there's just no survival benefit to these activities. For this reason, some believe that our response to music is proof that there's more to us than just biological and physiological mechanics – that the only way to be moved by the spirit, so to speak, is to have one in the first place.

There are games. Estimate Zoe's Belly Size, a purse scavenger hunt (who would have guessed that my mother had an overdue utility bill in her bag?), a baby-sock-matching relay, and, now, a particularly disgusting foray in which baby diapers filled with melted chocolate are passed around for identification by candy bar brand.

Even though this isn't really my cup of tea, I play along. My part-time bookkeeper, Alexa, has organized the whole event – and has even gone to the trouble of rounding up guests: my mother, my cousin Isobel, Wanda from Shady Acres and another nurse from the burn unit of the hospital where I work, and a school counselor named Vanessa who contracted me to do music therapy earlier this year with a profoundly autistic ninth grader.

It's sort of depressing that these women, acquaintances at best, are being substituted for close friends. Then again, if I'm not working, I'm with Max. And Max would rather be run over by his own lawn-mowing machines than identify chocolate feces in a diaper. For this reason alone, he is really the only friend I need.

I watch Wanda peer into the Pampers. 'Snickers?' she guesses incorrectly.

Vanessa gets the diaper next. She's tall, with short platinum blond hair and piercingly blue eyes. The first time I met her she invited me into her office and gave me a blistering lecture on how the SATs were a conspiracy by the College Board to take over the world eighty dollars at a time. *Well?* she said when she finally stopped for a breath. *What do you have to say for yourself?*

I'm the new music therapist, I told her.

She blinked at me, and then looked down at her calendar and

flipped the page backward. *Ah*, she said. *Guess the rep from Kaplan is coming tomorrow.*

Vanessa doesn't even glance down at the diaper. 'They look like Mounds to me,' she says drily. 'Two, to be exact.'

I burst out laughing, but I'm the only one who seems to get Vanessa's joke. Alexa looks devastated because her party games aren't being taken seriously. My mother intervenes, collecting the diaper from Vanessa's place mat. 'How about Name That Baby?' she suggests.

I feel a twinge in my side and absently rub my hand over the spot.

My mother reads from a paper Alexa has printed off the Internet. 'A baby lion is a . . .'

My cousin's hand shoots up. 'Cub!' she yells out.

'Right! A baby fish is a . . . ?'

'Caviar?' Vanessa suggests.

'Fry,' Wanda says.

'That's a verb,' Isobel argues.

'I'm telling you, I saw it on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*—'

Suddenly I am seized by a cramp so intense that all the breath rushes out of my body.

'Zoe?' My mother's voice seems far away. I struggle to my feet. *Twenty-eight weeks*, I think. *Too soon.*

Another current rips through me. As I fall against my mother, I feel a warm gush between my legs. 'My water,' I whisper. 'I think it just broke.'

But when I glance down, I am standing in a pool of blood.

Last night was the first night Max and I ever talked about baby names.

'Johanna,' I whispered, after he turned out the light.

'Sorry to disappoint,' Max said. 'But it's just me.'

In the dark, I could see his smile. Max is the sort of man I never imagined would be attracted to me – big, broad, a surfer with a shock of blond hair and enough wattage in his smile to make grocery clerks drop his change and soccer moms slow down near our driveway. I was always considered smart, but by no stretch of the imagination am I a looker. I am the girl next door, the wallflower, the one whose

features you cannot recall. The first time he talked to me – at his brother's wedding, where I was filling in for the lead vocalist in the band, who'd developed a kidney stone – I turned around, certain that he was speaking to someone else. Years later he told me that he never knew what to say to girls but that my voice was like a drug; it had seeped into his veins and given him the courage to come up to me during the band's fifteen-minute break.

He didn't think a woman with a master's degree in musicology would want anything to do with a college dropout / surf rat who was scraping together a landscaping business.

I didn't think a man who could have taken home his pick of anyone with two X chromosomes would find me even remotely attractive.

Last night he put his gentle hand over our baby, an umbrella. 'I thought talking about the baby was bad luck.'

It was. Or, at least, it always had been, to me. But we were so close to making it to the finish line. This was so real. What could possibly go wrong? 'Well,' I said, 'I changed my mind.'

'Okay, then. Elspeth,' Max said. 'After my favorite aunt.'

'Please tell me you're making that up . . .'

He laughed. 'I have another aunt named Ermintrude—'

'Hannah,' I countered. 'Stella. Sage.'

'That's a spice,' Max said.

'Yeah, but not like Ground Cloves. It's pretty.'

He leaned over my belly and pressed his ear against it. 'Let's ask her what she wants to be called,' Max suggested. 'I think . . . wait . . . no, hang on, she's coming in loud and clear.' He looked up at me, his cheek still against our baby. 'Bertha,' he pronounced.

The baby, as if to comment, gave his jaw a swift kick; and I was sure at the time that this meant she was fine. That it hadn't been bad luck at all.

I am being turned inside out; I am falling through blades. I have never felt so much agony, as if the pain is trapped under my skin, and trying desperately to slice its way out.

'It's going to be all right,' Max says, clasping my hand as if we are about to arm-wrestle. I wonder when he arrived. I wonder why he is lying to me.