

NICKI, NICOLE
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Chapter 1 – All Baby

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At the front desk they asked her what her name was. They asked how far apart the contractions were. Someone stuck a band on her wrist and said, “No more questions. She’s having it, bring her up.” With the next contraction she nearly bit her lip in half.

Someone wheeled her next to a bathroom. They told her to change into a gown and left. Now she was incomprehensibly, completely alone. I can’t do this, Nicki thought, yanking at her shirt, trying to pull it over her head. She tugged at her stretch pants and underwear. Then she couldn’t find the armholes. Open in back? Open in front? Where are the doctors? Where are the nurses? Where is my fucking husband? The gown was backwards. She didn’t care. Labor was supposed to take hours. What happened to first stage and second stage? Nicki groped for the doorknob. Trapped. She had to escape. Her body was dead. Her feet, dead.

“Are you ok?” she heard someone say through the door. She couldn’t answer. It was starting. Was this some kind of fucking joke? Was this transition? Fucking transition. Her hand slid off the doorknob. She was going to have her baby on the floor. Keep it together. Focus. Breathe. She fastened her eyes on the corner of the bathroom mirror. Lock your eyes to the point of silver. Hard focus. Breathe air. Breathe through pain.

The corner of the mirror brought her back. The corner of the mirror saved her. She lifted her hand to the doorknob and turned it. People were out there.

Someone helped her into a bed that seemed too high off the floor. Who were these people? Where was her doctor?

A man in green scrubs tugged and tethered her belly, strapping a monitor on. Why? Is my baby okay? Why? She dug her heels into the mattress. It was coming. Pain stacked on pain.

“She’s ready,” said the nurse. “Okay, Mrs. Nicole, push with the next contraction.” Someone wiped a cloth across her forehead. Someone told her to put her chin down. Where was Kenny? I won’t see him with my chin like this, she thought.

“Push.”

“I don’t know how to push,” she screamed.

It was preposterous. Hideous. The baby was coming out of the wrong place. Between each push she looked for Kenny. Not being there was the worst thing he’d ever done. She pushed with her rage. “It’s coming,” said someone. Suddenly, in an explosion of lucidity and wonder, Nicki bore down.

The nurse told her she had a boy. She had wished for a girl but now that he was here, she only wanted him. Her baby boy. She twisted her head to look but her view was blocked by the man in green.

“One more thing. We’ve got to deliver that placenta. Give me one last big push, young lady.” She felt a hand press down on her belly. Something jello-y slid out of her.

Nicki was floating. Any thought of pain forgotten, the memory of it, irretrievable. They were cleaning and wrapping her baby. “We are giving him an Apgar test,” said the nurse.

“Is he okay? Where’s Kenny? He was supposed to be here.”

“You did very well, Mrs. Nicole. Ten fingers, ten toes, a beautiful boy,” said the nurse, placing the newborn in Nicki’s arms.

She no longer felt her own body. She watched the baby’s tiny chest rise and fall and rise and fall. She lifted him closer.

“Support his head,” said the man in green. She held the baby’s head like a ball of blown glass cupped in her hand. It was perfectly round and covered in amber down. “What a beautiful little head,” she thought. She studied his face. He had none of either her or Kenny’s characteristics. He wasn’t a typical wrinkled newborn. His face was silky smooth and pink, his eyelids, like tiny rose petals.

How could Kenny have abandoned her now and missed the birth of their beautiful boy? What if something awful had happened to him?

A little while later the nurse wheeled her and her baby out of the delivery room. “It’s a baby factory here today. I think you’re the ninth delivery.”

Nicki quickly scanned the hallway for Kenny, trying not to take her eyes off the baby. Her cell phone was still in the car.

“Could you let me know if you see anyone wandering around who might be looking for me?”

“I’ll try. I’m sure your husband had a very good reason.”

The nurse rolled her into another room and helped Nicki onto a bed.

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There was a knock on the door. “May we come in?” Marlene poked her head in. Nicki hadn’t seen her sister since Marlene married and converted from being half-Jewish to full-on Orthodox Jew six months ago. In fact, Nicki might not have recognized Marlene. She wore a bulky artificial-looking black wig, a baggy cardigan and tan ankle-length skirt that made her look like she came from another generation.

Nicki decided to save her comments about the atrocious looking wig for another time.

“Kinehora. A blessing from God,” exclaimed Marlene, gazing at the baby in Nicki’s arms.

Still standing in the doorway, Marlene’s husband, Sam, removed his black fedora. White tassels hung from under his black well-worn jacket. Perspiration ran down the side of his face onto his long beard.

“Baruch Hashem. We should get started,” he told Marlene.

“It’s okay to come in, Sam,” said Nicki.

Marlene touched Nicki’s hand. “We heard from Mom you’d gone into labor. ... and well, here you are.” Her eyes teared up. She looked away.

Was she jealous? Marlene, 28 and two years older than Nicki, must have wanted to have a baby too. Religious Jews were always pregnant.

“Is your husband here?” asked Sam, taking a tentative step into the room.

It was the first time Nicki heard Sam speak to anyone other than Marlene.

“I’m sure he’ll be here any minute. He was just parking the car.” She looked down at her baby, imagining having to raise it alone. She’d occasionally daydreamed about being on her own and now it was coming true. She felt Marlene’s slender hand stroke her cheek, as if her sister was reading her thoughts.

Kenny burst in wearing a blue paper gown and booties. "There you are! Finally." He barged past Sam straight to Nicki's bed. Marlene gave him a burning stare and stepped aside.

"Oh, Kenny, where were you? You missed everything. Look at him. Isn't he perfect? Doesn't he have the most beautiful head you've ever seen?"

Kenny squeezed her arm. "You did so great." Then he pulled up next to her on the bed and wrapped her in an embrace and in that moment, Nicki smelled the marijuana on his clothes and hair and knew. A flash of anger, then disappointment, then pity. Why now, when she needed him the most, did he have to be a no-show? Could it be that he'd wanted to miss the birth of his child? He used to be everything to her when they first married. But so much had changed since then.

"Hey, look at him, he's got a dimpled chin like me. You aced it, Baby," he said again, beaming down at the baby.

"Where were you?" she whispered.

"Everything is okay. Don't worry, I'm here, now," he said, with a forced smile.

Maybe there was an explanation. Maybe this was the only way he could keep calm. He had been anxious about the baby all along, afraid of not being a good enough father. Or maybe in her panicky, overwhelmed state, it was some kind of misunderstanding. She couldn't think about any of that right now.

"Sam and I both thought it would be such a wonderful idea to have Havdalah right here in the hospital with you."

Kenny looked at Nicki, blankly.

"I have no idea what she's talking about either," said Nicki.

"It's a service to mark the end of Shabbat," explained Marlene. "You're not allowed to carry anything on Shabbat. It's work. But we need to find candles and spice. We practically ran all the way to make it on time. Kenny, could you please help look?" said Marlene.

"No. What are you, crazy? My wife just gave birth and you want me to go on a scavenger hunt now? Forget it, I'm not moving off this bed. I want to be with my boy."

Nicki started to hand the baby to Kenny, but he just sat there dumbstruck, his arm tightening around her shoulder. She was too overwhelmed to react.

Then she looked over to her sister. It was absurd, Marlene showing up, launching into some obsessive spiritual mission, though Nicki realized her intentions were basically pure. Having a baby was, in fact, some kind of miracle.

The door swung open. "How marvelous! Everyone is here!" exclaimed Nicki's mother, Elizabeth, striding to the bed in her pumps. Tears gathered in her eyes. Nicki's mother was a full-figured woman. Expensive perfume, a knit sweater set, expensive gold chains and bracelets--everything about her always classy and crisp. "My grandson," she sighed, kissing Nicki and the baby.

"Congratulations, darling," Nicki's father bellowed, squeezing in next to his wife with a fistful of helium balloons. A piece of Alan's comb-over fell in his eyes as he bent to kiss her. His round cheeks puffed out with a big warm smile. There was a flurry of kisses and handshakes. Elizabeth instructed Alan to put the balloons on the windowsill.

"We need to get started. Time is of the essence," said Marlene and went on to explain the impromptu service to her parents. "Kenny, will you come?" she added.

"Alan, go help her," said Elizabeth.

"Let's go, buddy," said Alan to Kenny. "Duty calls."

Frowning, Kenny stood up. Alan patted him on the shoulder. "Just wait until you have a daughter of your own."

After they left, Nicki's mother took the baby in her ample arms. Nicki got up and staggered to the bathroom. She loved her family but she wished she could be alone with her baby. Everything was happening too quickly. The way they had all descended on her and soon they would do some kooky religious thing. She was light-headed. Crampy. Her body felt soft, like a melon gone bad. She changed her pad and looked in the mirror. Her hair stood up in spikes, the skin under her eyes was sunken. But she was smiling, a proud, feverish smile. I did it! I have a healthy baby boy, and nothing else matters, she thought. Slowly, she climbed back into bed.

Kenny wandered back into the room with a sandwich wrapped in saran wrap.

Alan gayly presented a baby-blue banded cigar to each of the men.

"Don't you dare light that," said Elizabeth. Then Marlene and Sam filed in. Sam placed a stack of Dixie cups and a bottle of Welch's grape juice next to the sandwich on the tray table.

"We had to scramble but we found what we needed," said Marlene.

Nicki gave in to all the commotion. What choice did she have?

"Now," said Sam, glancing at his watch.

"It's a religious service," Kenny said to Elizabeth, as if he were the expert.

"Separation of Shabbat from the rest of the week. Kenny, please turn off the light," said Marlene. "Come," she added gesturing to everyone.

In the darkened room they surrounded the bed, Sam and Marlene on one side, her parents and Kenny on the other. Marlene passed around cups of grape juice. Sam began chanting an ancient solemn prayer. Nicki gently took off the baby's cap, smoothed the golden peach fuzz and savored the sweet scent of his head. Her family receded into the background, like floating holograms.

"Don't drink yet," said Sam abruptly, just as Kenny was about to sip.

"Drink, don't drink. Sit, stand. These Jews can't seem to make up their minds," said Nicki's father.

"Oh, Alan, for goodness' sake," said Elizabeth. Nicki stifled a laugh.

Marlene pulled out a baggie full of light brown spice from the pocket of her cardigan. "Cinnamon. We sniff the spice so that the sweetness of the Shabbat can be carried over into the week."

The cinnamon was passed around. Nicki smiled tentatively at Kenny.

"Do you want to hold him now?" she whispered.

"Absolutely!"

"Careful," she said, handing the baby into his outstretched arms.

"That's right, hold his head in your hand," said Elizabeth.

"Hold him tight," said Nicki.

"I know how to hold my own baby!"

Marlene's mouth opened in a moment of shocked silence.

Kenny's cheeks flushed. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, eyes darting around the room searching for a sympathetic smile or nod. Then he turned to Nicki. "Look, I'm sorry, Baby," he said, his lips trembling.

She looked away, embarrassed for both him and herself, not knowing what to say or do.

Marlene lit two long tapered birthday candles and touched the wicks together so the bright yellow flames lapped at each other. "Hold your fingers near the candles. See the light on you, see

the light through your fingernails.” Nicki stretched out her hands towards the flames. Her fingers glowed.

“He’s so quiet,” whispered Kenny.

“Poor thing’s had a long, hard journey,” said Elizabeth. She held out her arms to take the baby from him.

“See good things, speak good things,” said Sam.

Sam and Marlene dipped their pinkies in their juice cups and sipped their juice.

“Dip for me, Alan,” said Elizabeth, nuzzling the baby. Marlene handed one of the candles to Sam. They dunked the burning wicks into their cups. A short hiss and the room went dark.

Marlene and Sam started singing softly.

All Nicki wanted was to be alone to lose herself in the dreamy haze of the astonishing experience she’d just had. She hadn’t even had a chance to see what her baby really looked like, to unwrap the blanket, trail her hand across his chest and roll his tiny toes in her fingers. Her eyes slid closed. Alexander Thomas Nadler-Murphy. She repeated it slowly to herself, tuning out the world.

Nicki’s phone jingled from inside Kenny’s pocket.

“See, I remembered your phone,” he said.

“Not now,” she whispered, shaking her head.

“Someone turn on the light,” said Alan when the song ended.

The phone jingled again. “It’s Jocelyn,” said Kenny, holding out the phone.

She motioned for him to hand it over.

Nicki placed the phone on the blanket beside her and held her arms out for the baby. “Put it on speaker,” she said, nestling the baby in her arms.

“Any news?” said Jocelyn.

“A boy. He’s perfect. Just a second.” She looked up at her family, with a pleading expression.

“Fucking A! You did it,” Jocelyn’s voice boomed out of the phone.

Marlene’s eyes went wide.

“I think you’re ready for some privacy, darling,” said her mother.

“Yes, thank you all so much for coming.”

“How about an extra pillow?” said her father.

Nicki nudged her hand out from under the baby and waved.

“You did good, Sweetie,” said her father, as he kissed her on the forehead.

“See you all soon,” Nicki said.

“God willing,” said Marlene, and they left.

“Kenny, could you get me a cup of cold water? Come right back though, okay?” said Nicki, forcing a smile.

“I love you, Baby,” said Kenny and turned to leave.

“You too,” said Nicki, which was still mostly true.

“Name?” said Jocelyn.

“We were thinking about Alexander. Alex for short.”

“Alex. I approve.”

Nicki struggled to keep her eyes open.

“How’s the proud daddy doing?”

“He wasn’t there and then when he came in, I think he was high.”

“What a dick.”

Nicki felt blood seep out onto the pad. “No, he was scared shitless about having this baby. His dad was a mean alcoholic. It’s just that I’m so tired and marriage is such hard work.”

“If you have to work, then it isn’t working,” Jocelyn said.

The baby let out a tortured sound, more of a squawk than a cry. Nicki’s eyes snapped open. The sound tore through her. She was a three-hour mother, already crazy in love.

“Jocelyn, the baby’s crying. I have to go.”

“Of course, your show must go on. I’m over the moon,” said Jocelyn. “Talk soon, honeypie.”

Nicki tugged at her nightgown, yanked open the tie. Shit shit shit, she muttered, her heart ticking hard and fast as the baby brushed his lips over her breast. “What do I do? Where are you, Kenny?” she cried out.

And then miraculously the baby latched onto her nipple. There was a sharp sting and a tug as if her nipple were being sewn with needle and thread. With every stitch her uterus cramped. She ignored the pain and slowly began to feel calmer. The sucking felt both familiar and unfamiliar. She could no longer separate the pull in her uterus from the pull on her breast. She touched her lips to the soft warm spot on his head, felt tears wetting her cheeks and watched them drip down, anointing her baby with her own secret prayer.

END OF CHAPTER 1