

Chapter 1

Luke was a mystery, an enigma that baffled doctors from the time he was thrust into our world, hastened in his birth by his dying twin. The doctors scrambled to save them, and managed to keep Luke alive with the help of a breathing machine.

But his twin was too badly damaged. He weighed two pounds, and his skin had a gray pallor. With bowed heads, the doctors circled my husband and I as we hovered over our baby's incubator, hands clasped, and told us that his outlook was bleak. Our baby had a grade-four bleed in his brain, they explained, which would have required surgery to put in a shunt. He also had a hole in his heart that would have required open-heart surgery to repair it, and the lumen in his large intestine was closed, which would have required major surgery to open it.

"The only compassionate thing to do is to let him go," the doctor in charge of the neonatal ICU said in a gentle voice. "He's just too sick to survive all of these surgeries."

My husband and I clung to each other, and could only nod in mute assent. The doctor removed my baby from the machines that had kept him alive and placed him in my arms. Tears coursed down my cheeks as I kissed my baby

one last time, then cuddled him as he took his last breath and became still.

I looked up at the doctor and sobbed, “What killed my baby?”

The doctor pushed a lock of white hair from his eyes and spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. “It’s a mystery to us. We’ve never seen anything like this. His part of the placenta was in shreds, and we don’t know what caused that. The discrepancies in their weights indicates a disease process; we just don’t know which one it is, though. We thought that maybe you had passed a virus onto him; CMV to be specific, but we tested him for that, and he tested negative.”

Three days later, we had just buried our baby when the doctor called. “Good news,” he chortled. “We took Luke off the ventilator this morning, and he’s breathing room air without any difficulty. We’re just going to give him his vaccine, and then you can come and get him.”

I felt my spine stiffen as the breath got caught in my throat. “*Vaccine!*” I bellowed. “What are you giving him a vaccine for already? Isn’t he too tiny and too sick for a vaccine? He’s only four pounds, you know, and just now breathing on his own. Wouldn’t a vaccine, full of God-knows-what, be too much of a burden for his tiny body?”

The doctor’s chuckle reverberated through the phone line. “No need to worry. It’s 1992. Vaccines are *harmless*. And, besides, they’re required by law for every newborn, regardless of state of health. Now come get your baby and take him home.”

The sun was sinking behind a silhouette of pine trees when we pulled up in our yard, bathing the cotton fields that stretched to the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains in a palette of dusty pink and lavender. Our home had been a relic of the Civil War, an Antebellum homestead with sagging floorboards and peeling paint. Behind the house, a barn stacked with rusting canisters of fertilizer and pesticides that farmers had sprayed the fields with, leaned precariously over an old black well, which we used for our drinking and cooking water.

Just as we had alit from the car a plane flew over our heads, showering the fields with chemicals. A breeze ruffled my hair, damp with moisture from the hot, humid air. As I removed Luke from his car seat, I instinctively covered my baby's face with his blanket as I bundled him in my arms, shielding him from particles that rained upon us.

I felt my brow crease as I stared at the taillights of the waning plane, then turned to my husband. "Are you sure it's safe for Luke, living here surrounded by all of these chemicals?"

Gary, my husband, a tall, slim man with black hair and dark skin that hinted at his Italian heritage, scowled at me. "How many times do you keep asking me that same tired question? And, how many times do I have to tell you the same thing over and over and *over* again? You and Luke are absolutely safe here. I'm a doctor, for God's sake. Don't you trust me enough to know what I'm talking about?"

He lowered his voice until it became a velvety croon, then draped an arm around my shoulders, pulling Luke and I against the comfort of his chest. “Come on, baby. Do you actually think that I would put you and our baby in harm’s way?”

My shoulders sagged and I shook my head, caving into the power of my husband’s charm, once again. “No,” I whispered, “I have faith in you.”

Gary had fallen in love with the decrepit old house upon crossing its crumbling threshold, insisting on buying it and restoring it to its former glory. We, or should I say I, scraped faded wallpaper off the walls and sanded layers of paint that had withstood the test of time for more than a century, gagging and choking on clouds of dust.

It was shortly after I had applied the last layer of paint that I found out that I was pregnant with twins