

Abigail: Father's Joy



Her mother, Tracey, placed her on the couch and sat next to her. Her mother grabbed her hand and put it on her belly. Ella looked at her mother's extended belly in boredom before she started squirming to get down. The three year old wanted to go back to her playroom and play with her Legos.

"Ella, wait for a moment," Tracey said as she kept her hand over Ella's. Ella started moaning, but stopped suddenly. Her head whipped in her mom's direction with her eyes bugged out as she snatched her hand away. Tracey laughed.

"That was your sister saying hi to you."

"The baby?" Ella questioned curiously.

"Yeah, honey. She can't wait to meet you." Ella and her mom smiled at each other. Ella continued to rub her mom's stomach.

"Ella?"

"Yes, Mommy?"

"You're going to be the best big sister ever, right?" Tracey prompted Ella softly. At first, Ella wasn't so happy about the new baby.

"Yeah!" Ella yelled out joyfully.

"That's my big girl. Ava is always going to be lucky to have you."

Ella walked into the cafe and scanned the room. She saw her younger sister sitting at a table in the back. Ava's eyes glued to her hands as she ripped a napkin to shreds. Ella sighed as she realized that Ava was nervous about something. Ava looked up and gave her a short wave as she walked towards the table.

“Hey, Ella.”

“Hey. What did that poor napkin do to you?” Ella asked to see if she could get a chuckle out of Ava. She could not. Ava looked down at her hands as if she didn’t notice her own actions and put the tissue scraps down. Ava opened her mouth to speak, but then closed it quickly.

“Okay, what happened? We talked last week and everything was fine.”

Ava sighed and shook her head as she said, “Nothing’s wrong really... at least Max and I don’t think so.”

“Well then, would it hurt your face if you smiled?” Ava rolled her eyes and slightly smiled to appease Ella.

“That’s better. Now what’s up?”

“Okay, you have to promise not to freak out like everyone else has.”

“Oh god. You’re going to be the reason my hair turns gray before I’m twenty five years old.”

“Ella, be serious. I can’t take another explosion so promise me,” Ava said with a sudden serious voice.

“Ava, why do I suddenly feel a strong sense of déjà vu coming on? Last time you did this, I promised and then you told me that you and Max had eloped on your eighteenth birthday. It can’t be bigger than that, right?” Ella asked with a snicker as she ran her fingers through her hair. Ava said nothing.

“Ava, it’s bigger,” she whispered in disbelief.

Ava sat silently, stared in her sister’s eyes and held out her pinkie finger. Ella raised her eyebrow and crossed her arms tightly. They sat there for another minute or so before Ella grew

frustrated by her sister's stubbornness that she never could outdo. Ella held out her pinkie and she begrudgingly said fine. Ella sat up straight and clutched the arms of her chair to brace herself.

Ava put on a smile, too bright to be believable, and said "Congratulations, you're going to be an auntie."

Ava stood in the front of the full body mirror in their bathroom. She could hear Max buzzing around the apartment with Ella. They were preparing for the surprise baby shower they thought she knew nothing about. She could read her two favorite people like open books although they would deny it if asked. The two of them had been running errands together for her and getting suspiciously quiet when they heard her footsteps moving towards them. That morning, they ordered her to get dressed so that they could go eat brunch at Ella's house. Ava thought they were delusional if they thought that they were subtle. She wondered how early they woke up to decorate Ella's place.

Ava stared into the mirror to look at her face. She didn't think she looked as tired and bothered as she felt. She knew she had to control her face most days now and especially today. Her husband and sister worked hard to make the baby shower happen. She predicted that her mother had cooked and baked for the party. Ava wanted to look appreciative and happy. Ava began to practice her smile for the party and pictures. It needed to look genuine. She tried a closed smile and a wide smile before settling for something in the middle. Ava checked her phone background, a picture of Max and her that they asked a random man passing by to take the

day after their wedding, and was satisfied to see her practiced smile was close enough. She took a deep breath, nodded to herself in the mirror and left the bathroom to face her day.

Ella woke up to the buzzing of her cellphone as it vibrated on her nightstand. It stopped vibrating as she reached for it. After pushing her power button, she saw seven missed calls from her mother, three missed calls from her father and three missed calls from her sister. She sat up quickly as she unlocked her phone and started to dial her mother's number. She was interrupted from entering the last two digits when she heard knocking on her apartment door. Ella ran to the door and looked through the peephole. She could see her sister pacing in front of the door. She opened it quickly.

"Ava, what's go—" she didn't finish her question before she had her arms filled with her sister. Ava clutched the back of Ella's shirt as she sobbed. Immediately, Ella began stroking her back. She glanced down to the floor to see her infant niece's car seat on the floor. Abigail's small light brown eyes peeked out from the blanket tightly wrapped around her. She began to hear her sister mumbling into her shirt so she pulled her away.

"What did you say? "

Repeatedly, she mumbled, "He's gone."

Ava laid in bed, thinking about the day Max proposed. Max and she had been lying down in Max's backyard, with their hands behind their heads. They were staring up at the sky as the sun set. Max had to drive her home afterwards so that they wouldn't be late for dinner. Neither one of them wanted to miss her mother's famous beef stew. Max turned over onto his side so that

he could face her. She stared up at the sky for another second before matching his position. She looked over at him to see his goofy face. Ava didn't want to feel cliché, but she remembered the spark in his eyes.

“What?”

Max grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Let's get married.”

She snorted and said, “Oh, shut up.”

“I'm being serious.”

“Max, be for real. Our parents would freak out if we even mention it. They think we're too young.”

“So we don't have to mention it. You'll finally be eighteen next week and we'll both be adults. We don't need permission,” Max said plainly. She remembered how her mouth had hung open.

“How long have you been thinking about this?”

“A while now,” Max replied as he shrugged his shoulders and tried to look casual. His cheeks turned pink. She said nothing as she stared into his eyes. He had kept the stare going as he waited for her to speak. One of her eyebrows rose and she smirked.

“So you really want to marry me?” she asked in a playful tone. He chuckled and grabbed her other hand.

“Yeah, I do. You really want to marry me?”

“I guess I'll take forever with you.”

Ava was jolted out of her memory by the sudden crying of Abby. She turned to the other side of the bed and felt the cold sheets. She closed her eyes tightly to trap the tears inside. She

didn't want to move, but Abby continued to cry. She huffed and left her lonely bed to try and quiet Abby.

"Mom, why did you leave Ava alone?"

"Hello to you too, Ella. How nice of you to call me. I'm doing fine, thanks for asking."

"Sorry mom, but I just got off the phone with a pleading Ava. She was begging me to come help her because she said you all decided not to help her anymore."

"She needs more help than we can give her," Tracey said sadly.

"So you left her with no help so she can get better?"

"We want to give her a reality check. She refuses to believe that therapy is the best option. Ava has to face the truth. She eats little, sleeps even less."

"She's nineteen year old, a new mother and recent widow. You're right though. She is milking it, huh? It's time to spring back."

"Ella, don't take that tone with me," Tracey started sternly and continued, "I know you're protective of Ava, but don't be disrespectful. We're not saying that she's over dramatic. We're saying she's unhealthy. You have to see that."

Ella recognized her mother's weary tone and instantly felt sorry. They were all so tired. It was rough for all of them to lose Max, see Ava wither right before their eyes and try to care for Abigail. Ella, her parents, and Max's parents all pitched in and still it wasn't enough willpower. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply and sunk down onto her couch.

"I'm sorry. I know she's not healthy, but I don't think anyone is after a disaster. She just needs time, Mom."

“Time only helps if someone is trying to continue. She isn’t our Ava anymore. I don’t know if I can take seeing her like this.”

“She’s going to be fine. I’ll make sure of it,” Ella said determinedly.

“Honey, you can’t place everything on your shoulders,” Tracey argued.

“I’ll take care of her for now. You guys need some time to refresh. None of us are any good to Ava and Abby if we aren’t charged.”

“I’ll come help you as soon as I feel I can... talk to her about seeing a therapist. She’ll listen to you.”

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do, but I’ll have to wait or she’ll only get more upset,” Ella agreed before ending the call.

That evening, Ella used the spare key and entered Ava’s apartment. Everything was the same as it had been the week before. She glanced at the simple white walls where family portraits once hung. There were baby toys scattered all around the living room and kitchen. An open plastic container of barely touched food and a Gerber’s jar of sweet pears sat on the kitchen counter. The apartment was quiet, too quiet. She was shocked to not hear Abby crying.

Slowly, Ella eased open the door to Abby’s nursery and saw her lying down in her crib. Abby stared at her as she approached the crib. Abby’s chubby cheeks had tear stains on them that had dried. She picked up her niece and cradled her in her arms. She sat down in the rocking chair by the window. Once Abby was asleep, she put her back in her crib. Ella hoped her niece would stay asleep for at least three hours, but it was rare for the three month old to be asleep for one hour this early in the evening. She was alarmed to have not seen or heard her sister since she

entered the apartment. She went to her sister's room. The image she was met with made her heart ache instantly.

Ava was in the middle of her bed in a fetal position, with her back facing the door. She had earphones on playing music so loud that Ella could hear it from the doorway. Although she couldn't see her, Ella knew she was awake and probably crying silently. Seeing her sister cry was quite common nowadays. In order to not scare Ava, she walked to the other side of the bed to say hello. Ella stood in front of her, but she didn't even blink. Ella squatted down and pulled an earphone out of her ear.

"Hey, sis. I can't have you going deaf on me. Why are you playing that so loudly?"

"I tried the TV and it isn't loud enough. I can't take hearing that child cry anymore," Ava said brokenly. She sat up on the bed as she gripped the cover that was wrapped around her.

"Ava, you can't ignore her until she stops," Ella said with concern and a frown.

"She won't stop crying and I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"You aren't losing your mind."

"She isn't hungry and she isn't dirty. I realized that I was standing in the middle of the nursery completely lost."

Ella looked at her sister with sympathy. Her eyes were red, she had dark circles around her eyes and she was the palest she had ever been in her life. She looked like she was hanging on by a thread.

"I have yelled, I have cried, and I have pleaded with that baby to just be quiet. Nothing works. We don't click. We never did. It's like we're strangers."

"Honey, you're a new mommy. You won't know everything right away."

“He was a new daddy. He was a natural. He could smile at her in the mornings after being awake all night. Max was so happy. I don’t feel like that. All of you are happier with her than I am,” Ava confessed as tears leaked out of her eyes again. Ella embraced her sister to try and comfort her.

“Ava, you’re stressed and sleep deprived. No one can blame you for not being in the best mood.” Ava simply hummed.

“Max... he haunts me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I dream of him constantly. Sometimes I think I hear his voice. It’s like he’s gone, but he didn’t leave me,” she said with a mixture of pain and annoyance.

“He’ll always be a part of you. The two of you made Abby,” Eva said as she tried to console her sister.

“... maybe I wish we hadn’t. He—”

“Don’t say things like that.”

“—wanted a baby so badly and now look at who’s missing.”

“I think you are forgetting how happy and excited you were to be a mom,” Ella suggested calmly although her heartbeat raced. She was trying to nip the conversation in the bud before Ava said anything else irregular or dark. She wasn’t talking like her sister. Ava shook her head.

“Are you positive that I was so thrilled?” Ava asked Ella. The two sisters’ eyes met and Ella felt a shiver run through her body. Ella moved away from Ava and pressed down on her shoulders.

“Why don’t you try to sleep, Ava? You always did say the most ridiculous things when you were sleepy.”

“You’re right. I’ll try although I know I’ll wake right back up for Abby.”

“I’ll worry about Abby. Just please, sleep.” She was truly shaken by her sister’s words. She wanted her to sleep so she wouldn’t be talking.

“Thank you. I’m sorry I upset you.”

Ella nodded, said a soft promise that everything would be okay and walked towards the door. As she turned off the lights and shut the door, she pretended to not hear her sister’s hopeless agreement.

Ella didn’t want her mother to be right. Ava was still the same deep down. She had to be. Ella hated to believe that her baby sister disliked her own baby. She felt shameful for thinking that Ava would hurt Abby, but she couldn’t shake her bad feeling. Something inside told her not to leave the two so she stayed the night.

Ava had the worst nightmare. A nightmare she would tell no one about. It started with the memory of one of the first dates she and Max had had. She relived the date as she dreamed. They went to go see some weird movie that Max wanted to see. Ava fell asleep during the middle. When Max woke her up at the end, she swore that she had screwed up the entire date. She didn’t relax until he suggested they do something she wanted to do. He had felt bad that the movie bored her. Ava and Max went to a roller skating rink. They giggled the entire time as they watched each other fall on their butts. The giggling stopped abruptly and then Ava heard screaming and crying.

She saw Abby in her crib crying, wiggling and red in the face. She saw herself walk into the room with a pillow clutched tightly in her hands. Ava walked up to the crib as she slowly extended her arms and raised her hands above the crib. She was sweating, her hair was a mess and her eyes were red. Ava looked disturbed. Her hands shook as she lowered the pillow over Abby's face. It didn't take long for Ava to be surrounded by a silence that was foreign to the nursery.

Ava woke up suddenly. She struggled to control her breathing as her heart raced. She sat up and looked around. She understood that she was in her bed. She glanced at her window as lightning flashed. She could hear the rain bouncing off the window pane. She realized she must have been woken up by thunder. Her sheets were twisted and her hair stuck to the sweat on her forehead.

According to her clock, it was three in the morning. She laid back down on her back. She thought about going to look at Abby, but she stayed rooted in her bed. Although she was ninety nine percent sure it was just a nightmare, the remaining one percent kept her in her room. If it was real, she didn't want to go see. Ava froze as she heard the nursery door open and close. She remained frozen until she heard the guest bedroom door, down the hall, open and close quietly. She remembered Ella was with them. Ella must have been in the nursery checking on Abby while she was asleep. That made her feel settled more. Ava trusted Ella with Abby more than anyone in the world, including herself.

Ava sat at the kitchen counter while she watched her sister wash Abby in the sink. Ella and Abby smiled at each other as Ella washed her with a small washcloth. Ava cleared her throat to grab her attention.

“When are you leaving?” she asked weakly.

“I wasn’t planning on leaving anytime soon. Why?”

“I don’t know. I assumed you were going to leave quickly like everyone did. I know I’m a downer.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Ella reassured before continuing, “Anyway, have you talked to Mom or Dad recently?”

“No, I haven’t charged my phone in about a week.”

“You should talk to them. Maybe you could go visit them. You’ve only been around Abby and me for a while. I think some fresh air would be great.”

“Ella, no. I’m not interested. I don’t need anything out there.”

“You need a change of scenery. They care about you, Ava. Everyone needs time to destress, that’s all.”

“I like being in here with you.”

“You mean being here with Abby and I.”

“I meant what I said.”

Ella sighed deeply and turned to face her sister. She had been basically ignoring Abby for days now and it had to stop.

“Ava, come here. Finish washing Abby while I make a bottle for her.”

“I don’t think that would be smart, Ella,” Ava said. She actually sounded hesitant. Ella was surprised. Any emotion from her that broke her zombielike exterior was noteworthy.

“I’ll be standing right beside you,” Ella replied as she wrung out the washcloth and held it out for Ava.

Ava got up and took the washrag. She dipped it in water and looked over at Abby. She didn’t step closer towards Abby. She stood there, frozen in place as she squeezed the washcloth in her hand.

“Ella, I can’t.” She began to grow panicked. She gripped the kitchen counter as her heart sped up and she began to sweat. Ella looked over at her sister before she pulled her away and guided her to the couch. Then, she put Abby in a towel and held her close to her chest.

“Ava, what aren’t you telling me? That wasn’t normal.”

“I’m afraid to touch her,” she whispered faintly.

“Ava Grace, what did you just say?”

“I said that I’m afraid to touch her!” she yelled out. Ava continued with her confession since Ella remained silent, “I think about hurting her sometimes. Mostly at night. I think about using a pillow or shaking her to stop her crying. It scares me.”

“I don’t know who you have become,” Ella confessed as she clutched Abby and her chest.

“Neither do I.”

Ella knew that now was the time. She had held off for long enough, if not too long. She began to press the topic of therapy. Ava agreed with her sister as she always tried to do. After all, Ella was her big sister who had always fixed any problem she faced. They searched for a

therapist in the area, called the office and made an appointment for the day after next. Ella tried to remain hopeful. Ava tried to appear hopeful in front of Ella.

Ella woke up and prepared herself to drive Ava to therapy. She was planning on going grocery shopping with Abby before returning to get Ava from therapy. Next, she got Abby ready, put her in her playpen and went to her sister's door.

"Wake up, slowpoke. Today's the day," Ella called out as she tried to put some cheer in her voice. She didn't want to act as if anything was different.

She was met with silence. She opened the door and saw her sister's room was empty. She knew the rest of the apartment was empty as well. Ella pulled out her phone to call her parents' house and then Max's parents' house. Both sets of parents told her that they hadn't seen Ava and to call them when she returned. Her mother assured her that Ava may have gone to get some fresh air and shake off the jitters of going to therapy. Ella wanted to believe that because Ava hardly ever opened up to anyone who wasn't family. If it wasn't for the mirror, she would have believed her mom. There was a sticky note on her sister's mirror. Written on it was:

Take care of Abigail. I'm sorry that you thought I could do it. I'm sorry that I couldn't do it

-Ava

Ella shook her head as she refused to believe that her sister had up and left. She went over to her dresser and opened drawers. She found them all emptied. She tried calling Ava, but

her phone was off. She plopped down on the bed when her knees started to feel weak. Ella couldn't even decide which feeling to feel first because they all came hurling at her swiftly. She felt a sob get caught in her throat while she desperately tried to gasp in air. Ella thought of all the signs that she ignored by hoping family time would be strong enough. She thought that she was foolish to think a miracle would happen and she would suddenly be given her sister back as her normal self.

When she finally stopped crying enough to move, she ignored the phone calls she was getting from the family. She wasn't ready to tell anyone. She didn't think she would be physically able to say it out loud yet. Ella got up and walked into Abby's nursery. Looking at the helpless infant, Ella felt her sorrow deeper. She picked up Abby and caressed her soft baby hair.

“Abigail... oh poor Abby.”