



Is it enough time to say goodbye?

Five Days Left

‘Unique,
gripping and
moving’
JODI PICOULT

Julie Lawson Timmer

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About the Book

A heartbreaking and uplifting read about the ultimate life choice

Mara is a successful lawyer, and a devoted wife and mother. Struggling with a devastating illness, she has set herself five days to make the hardest decision, for the sake of her family.

Scott lives a thousand miles away, and is a foster parent to a troubled eight-year-old. Scott is facing his own five day countdown until his beloved foster son is returned to his biological mother.

Mara and Scott connect through an online forum, and find a friendship to help guide them through the most difficult, and momentous, week of their lives.

About the Author

Julie Lawson Timmer grew up in Stratford, Ontario, and now lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan with her husband Dan, their four teenage children and two badly-behaved dogs. By day, she works as in-house legal counsel. By night, she is a writer, mom and stepmom, dreadful cook and fledgling CrossFitter. FIVE DAYS LEFT is her first novel.

Five Days Left

Julie Lawson Timmer



For Ellen

PART I

Tuesday, April 5

Five Days Left

Mara

MARA HAD CHOSEN the method long ago: pills, vodka and carbon monoxide. A 'garage cocktail,' she called it. The name sounded almost elegant, and sometimes, when she said it out loud, she could make herself believe it wasn't horrifying.

It would still be horrific for Tom, though, and she hated herself for that. She would rather do it without leaving a body for him. But as much as she'd love to spare him from being the one to discover her, she knew not letting him find her would be worse. And at least this was the tidiest option. He could have someone come and take her car away. Fill her side of the garage with something else, to block the image. Bikes, maybe. Gardening supplies.

A second car for himself. Maybe she should arrange to have one delivered after. Would that be too weird, though? A gift from your dead wife. She should have given him one years ago. For their anniversary, or to celebrate bringing baby Lakshmi home. Or just because. She should have done so many things.

Mara frowned. How could it be that she had spent almost four years ticking off all those items on her long list of things to do before she died, yet here she was, five days from it and still thinking of things she should have done?

Ah, but that was the trick of it. Tell yourself you'll wait until you've accomplished every last thing and you'd keep putting it off. Because there would always be one last thing. Which might be fine for someone who had the luxury of

delaying a few more weeks, or months, or years even, until they were finally out of excuses and ready to go through with it.

Mara didn't have that luxury. In less than four years, Huntington's disease, the mother of all brain cell destroyers, had already done more damage than she and Tom could have ever prepared for. She had the severance papers from the law firm to prove it. The once graceful, athletic body that was now slow to react, reluctant to cooperate.

If she allowed herself to experience that one more moment with her husband and daughter, to travel to that one last must-see destination, she might wake the next morning to find it was too late, and Huntington's was in control. And she would be trapped in the terrifying in-between of not being able to end her life on her own, and not truly living, either.

Time was against her. She couldn't risk waiting any longer. She could make it to Sunday, as she had planned. But she couldn't wait past then.

Mara took a long swallow of water from the glass on her bedside table and stood. Inhaling deeply, she reached to the ceiling with both hands and focused on the bathroom door across the room. It was tempting to cast her eyes up toward her hands, the way the move was supposed to be executed, but she had gotten cocky before and the hardwoods always won. She counted to five, exhaled and tilted forward slightly, pressing her hands toward the floor for another count of five. A Sun Salutation modified beyond recognition, but enough to clear the fog from her brain.

The hiss of the shower stopped and Tom emerged from the bathroom, toweling his dark hair. 'Good morning,' she said, eyeing his bare torso. 'You're wearing my favorite outfit, I see.'

He laughed and kissed her. 'You were out cold when I got up. I was planning on asking your parents to come over and

get Laks on the bus.’ He tilted his head toward the bed. ‘I can still call them, if you want to catch a few more hours.’

Laks. Mara’s throat closed. She reached the dresser and put a hand on it to steady herself. Turning away from her husband, she pretended to fuss over some spare change and loose earrings on the dresser. She swallowed hard and coaxed her throat into releasing some words.

‘Thanks, no,’ she said. ‘I’m up. I’ll put her on the bus. I need to get moving myself. I’ve got errands to run.’

‘You don’t have to run errands. Why don’t you write out a list and I’ll get anything you need on my way home.’

He walked to the closet, pulled on dress pants, reached for a button-down. She made a furtive wish for him to choose blue but his hand found green. She would try to remember to position a few of his blue shirts in front so he would reach for one before the end of the week and his cobalt eyes would flash one more time.

‘I’m capable of running a few errands, darling,’ she said.

‘Of course you are. Just don’t push it.’ He tried to sound stern, but his expression showed he knew she would take orders from no one.

He put on his belt – third hole – and she shook her head. He hadn’t gained a pound in twenty years. If anything, he was in better shape, logging more miles in his forties than he had in his twenties, a marathon a year for the past ten. She supposed she could take some credit for it, since these days he ran partly to manage stress.

She walked to the door, lightly touching his shoulder as she passed him. ‘Coffee?’

‘Can’t. Patients in twenty.’

A few minutes later, she felt him wrap his arms around her from behind as she stood at the kitchen counter, inserting a premeasured coffee pack into the coffeemaker. Loose grounds tended to end up on the counter or floor rather than in the filter these days.

Tom kissed the back of her neck. 'Don't do too much today. In fact, don't do anything at all. Stay home, take it easy.' He turned her around to face him and smiled in defeat. 'Don't do too much.'

Mara watched him disappear into the garage. She willed her breathing to slow and her eyes to stop burning. Turning to the coffeemaker, she made herself focus on the *plip, plip* of the coffee as it dripped into the pot, the scent of hazelnut, the steam rising from the machine. She set a cup on the counter, filled it halfway and gazed at it longingly. As tempted as she was to take a sip, she had learned to let it cool. Her hands couldn't be trusted to stay steady, and it was better to have only a stain to clean than a burn to soothe. Calmer, she made her way down the hall to her daughter's room and peeked in the doorway. A small head lifted drowsily from the pillow and a wide grin, gaping in the middle where four teeth had recently gone missing, greeted her. 'Mama.'

Mara sat on the bed, spreading her arms wide, and the girl climbed into her lap, pressing her body close and gripping tightly around her mother's neck.

'Mmmm, you smell so good.' Mara buried her face in her daughter's hair, freshly clean from last night's bath. 'Ready to take on another day of kindergarten?'

'I want to stay with you today.' The little arms clutched tighter. 'Not letting go. Not ever.'

'Not even if I . . . tickle . . . right . . . here?'

The small body collapsed in a fit of giggles and the arms loosened their grip, allowing Mara to wriggle away. She stood, took a few steps toward the door and, calling forth her best 'Mommy means business' look, pointed to the school clothes laid out on the glider chair in the corner of the room.

'All right, sleepyhead. Get dressed and brush your hair, then meet me in the kitchen. Bus comes in thirty minutes. Daddy let you sleep late.'

'Oh . . . kay.' The child stood, stepped out of her pajamas and walked to the chair.

Mara propped herself against the door frame, pretending to supervise so she could steal a few precious seconds watching the waif whose skinny, olive-colored frame still took her breath away.

As she dressed, Laks sang one of her rambling songs, a play-by-play of what she was doing, set to her own meandering tune. 'Sprite music,' Mara and Tom called it.

*'Then, I put my jeans on,
with the flowers on the pockets,
and a pink shirt,
that is so pretty.'*

She stepped away from the chair and did a pirouette, arms raised above her head, hands in 'fancy position,' as she had seen the big girls do at ballet school. Striking a final pose, she looked at her mother and smiled triumphantly. Mara forced her trembling lips into a smile and, not trusting her voice, held up a hand, fingers spread wide, indicating the number of minutes the girl had to make her way to the kitchen.

Mara

LYING IN BED on the night of her diagnosis almost four years ago, Mara had stared into the darkness while Tom, heartbroken beside her, slept fitfully. Long before the first gray streaks of dawn pushed away the inky black night, Mara made herself a promise: she would choose a date and not waver from it. No second-guessing, no excuses.

She would live like hell until that date arrived, as much in control of her remaining days as she could be. Give Huntington's a run for its money before she finally flipped it the bird, swallowed her cocktail and exited the world the same way she had lived in it - on her own terms. She wouldn't give the sonofabitch disease the satisfaction of taking that from her.

Choosing a date was easy: April 10, her birthday. She knew Tom and her parents would mourn her on that date no matter what, and it didn't seem fair to give them a second day to feel so sad. But which April 10, which birthday? Not the first one after her diagnosis, she decided - surely she had at least one good, full year left before the disease moved into the next stage. The second seemed too soon as well. But the fifth could be too late.

By the time the Texas sun had cast its earliest rays through the spaces in the blinds, turning their bedroom ceiling from light gray to white, Mara had concluded the safest plan was to choose a symptom that signaled the beginning of the end, a warning that the disease had moved out of its early stages and into the more advanced. Once

that symptom occurred, she would give herself until the next April 10, and then she would lower the curtain.

As she waited in the kitchen for Laks, a sudden wave of nausea hit her and she gripped the side of the counter, hoping the feeling would pass before her daughter appeared. She squeezed her eyes tight but there was no escaping yesterday, and her queasiness only worsened as the previous morning replayed itself on the inside of her eyelids.

She had been standing in the cereal aisle at the grocery store. A small boy stood several feet away, a chubby hand resting on his mother's hip as she bent to retrieve something from a low shelf. The boy smiled shyly at Mara and she smiled back.

He raised a hand and she was waving in return when, without warning, she felt the overpowering need to go to the bathroom. She tried to recall where the store's restroom was and wondered why her body was acting so impatient. Before she could come up with either answer, it was too late. Slowly, she tilted her head to inspect her light gray yoga pants, now showing a large wet patch at the crotch. A thin, dark line trailed down the inside of her right leg. 'Oh my God,' she whispered. 'Oh no.'

She put a hand in front of the biggest part of the stain, trying to hide it. But the boy had already seen, and his mouth formed a surprised 'O.' Mara tried to smile at him again, to reassure him there was nothing to be upset about - and nothing to tell his mother. Her mouth wouldn't cooperate, though, so she raised a finger to her lips. But the boy's mother straightened then, and he tugged on her wrist with one hand and pointed at Mara with the other. 'Mommy! That lady didn't get to the potty on time!'

Mara's face caught fire. She reached for the jacket she always carried in her shopping cart to ward off the store's high-powered air-conditioning, but it wasn't there. She had

forgotten it in her car. Frantically, she searched for something she could cover herself with.

The boy's mother, her face impassive in the studied manner of someone trying not to react, grabbed a package of paper towels from her cart and ripped them open as she walked toward Mara, her son in tow. 'Don't stare,' the woman whispered.

But the child's eyes remained fixed on Mara's wet pants. As they got closer, he pinched his nose with a tiny thumb and finger. 'Ewww.'

This brought a reprimanding hiss from his mother. 'Brian!' Reaching Mara, the woman held out a ream of paper towels. 'Maybe if you pat it?' Despite her neutral expression, her face was bright red and her nose twitched almost imperceptibly. 'I could get a blanket from my car but,' the woman said, nodding toward her son, 'by the time I get him all the way there and back . . .'

'Thank you,' Mara whispered, reaching for the paper towels. 'This has never happened before.' She blotted at her pants while Brian pulled on his mother's wrist. After a minute, Mara lifted wet, shame-filled eyes to the woman's soft, sympathetic ones. 'You don't have to stay. I don't want to upset your son.'

'He's fine,' the woman said, tearing off more paper towels and handing them over. Mara searched for somewhere to put the used sheets, finally shoving them into her purse. This earned a gasp from the boy, who renewed his efforts to pull his mother down the aisle. The woman tugged the wriggling child to her side and put a flat hand on his head, anchoring him in place. Bending so her lips were beside his ear, she whispered, 'This nice lady needs our help, and we're going to give it.'

'But—'

'Shh! Not one more word.'

Mara stopped working on her pants and raised her head, parting her mouth to speak. She'd had too much coffee, she

wanted to tell them. Not to mention all the water she had to drink to get the pills down. And the protein shake Tom insisted she drink every morning to keep weight on. Also, she'd been distracted by the long list of errands she had to run. She hadn't taken time to go to the restroom in the past few hours.

She closed her mouth. She wouldn't burden someone else with her story. Lowering her head, she dabbed more frantically but it was no use. The pants were too light, the stain too dark. And now she had white flecks all over from the paper towels. 'I don't think it's working,' she said to the woman, and a jagged shard of humiliation shot through her as she heard her frustration come out in a high-pitched whine. She stared at the wet paper towels in her fist. She would need a long, soapy shower to remove the stench.

Mara glanced at the boy again, disgust evident in the curl of his lip, and thanked God she was here alone with only strangers as witnesses. What if Laks had been with her? Or Tom? The thought drained the blood from her head and she put a hand on her cart to steady herself. 'I'm so sorry about this,' she said, looking from mother to son.

'What's wrong with her?' Brian whispered, and his mother and Mara locked eyes briefly, a wordless agreement they would both ignore the boy's question.

'He's darling,' Mara said, not wanting the woman to be upset with her son for his reaction. Who could blame him? 'I hate to do this, but I'm going to leave my cart right here and make a run for my car.'

'I can reshelve your things,' the woman said. Gesturing to Mara's pants, she said, 'It's a little better, actually.'

But her smile was plastic, and Mara felt like a child being told her self-cut hair looked 'fine.'

'Thank you for your kindness,' Mara said quietly. 'Please know how sorry I am.'

'Not at all. You take care now.'

As Mara retreated down the aisle, she could hear the woman's too-cheerful voice reading the rest of her grocery list aloud, drowning out the noise of the child beside her who was, Mara was certain, asking his mother what was wrong with the crazy lady with the purse full of pee-filled paper towels.

She forced herself to hold her head high as she walked past the cashiers and out the front door. By the time she reached the parking lot, her lips were trembling and she could feel the familiar pressure in the top of her throat, signaling impending tears. She toppled into her car, pulling the door closed almost before her feet were out of the way, and fell against the seat, hands covering her face.

'Oh my God, oh my God. Oh my God!'

Sobs tore from deep inside her and she gasped for air around them. When she was too exhausted to hold herself upright, she dropped her body forward, letting her head fall to the steering wheel. She stayed like that, bent forward and weeping, for an hour, rewinding the episode in torturously slow motion over and over in her mind, each time wishing for a different ending.

Finally, her body was too spent to produce any more tears or noise, and she became vaguely aware of cars pulling up nearby, the sound of radios, slamming doors, children calling to parents. She let herself rest against the steering wheel a little longer before she straightened, wiped her cheeks and nose with a sleeve and met her own gaze in the rearview mirror.

'That's it, then,' she said grimly to the puffy, red-rimmed eyes staring back at her. 'My birthday is on Sunday. I've got until then.'

Five days left, as of this morning. So little time. But she had started preparing almost four years ago, that early dawn as she lay beside her husband, settled on her deadline and promised herself she wouldn't make any excuses for letting it go by.

Since then, she had savored each moment as though it were her last. Big ones: Laks's birthdays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, their anniversary. And small ones: cooking with her mother, watching her father read bedtime stories to Laks, sitting on the bench out front, blowing bubbles while Tom and Laks raced to see who could pop them first. The small ones, she had decided, were the ones she would miss most.

'Mama?' Laks, backpack slung over one shoulder, the same as the big kids on the bus, trotted into the kitchen, reaching for the ballerina lunch bag on the counter. 'You didn't forget to pack me a cookie again, did you?' She eyed her mother suspiciously and unzipped the bag to peek inside. Satisfied, she zipped it up and thrust a hand out. 'Ready?'

A clump of hair stuck out over the girl's right ear, the result of a glue incident a week earlier. Laks's best friend, Susan, accidentally smeared some in her friend's hair and, in an effort to rectify her mistake, cut out the mess with safety scissors. In the days since, Mara had made a few attempts to get the child to wear her hair in a ponytail to hide the tufts, but each effort had ended in arguments and tears and Mara giving in. A lump the size of a fist blocked Mara's throat at the sight of her daughter, bristly-haired and gap-toothed and beautiful.

How could she ever be ready?

But this is why she had made her promise. So she would go through with it, ready or not.

'I'm not putting it in a ponytail, Mama,' Laks said, her chin jutting out a fraction in determination, a carbon copy of her mother even without the shared DNA, Tom often remarked. 'They're too pully on my hair. I told you.' She put a hand on her forehead and pulled the skin toward the back of her head, demonstrating.

Mara cleared her throat and stood. 'I know,' she said. 'I wasn't thinking about your hair. I was only being slow to

answer.'

'Oh.' Laks nodded, appeased. 'Then, are you ready?'

Mara kissed the top of Laks's head and ran a gentle palm over the bristles before taking the small hand. 'Yes, sweetie, I'm ready.'

Scott

SCOTT PULLED INTO the driveway and parked close to the sidewalk to leave room for Curtis, who was shooting hoops at the net attached over the garage door. Granny shots, the saving grace of an eight-year-old, he thought. Hearing the car, Curtis turned and waved.

'Nice arc on those shots, Little Man.'

'Ugh. I'm so tired of doing grannies but it's all I can do on this net.' The boy held the ball in front of him, eyeing it like it was a traitor, then nodded. Scott dropped his keys and briefcase onto the driveway and in one graceful movement he caught a sloppy bounce pass, set up a quick shot and sank it. Swoosh. Curtis grabbed the rebound and tried a similar shot. Short on grace and shorter on height, the ball arced a good two feet below the rim. He arched an eyebrow. 'See?'

Scott took the rebound. 'I know, I know. I should've bought one of those adjustable stand-alone hoops when we retired your friend over there.' He nodded toward a worn plastic basketball hoop leaning against the garage. Sinking another shot, he stood, arms open wide, and the boy ran to him, throwing his arms around Scott's waist. Scott stroked the head that rested against his stomach, his hand pale white in comparison to the brown skin showing through Curtis's wiry black hair. Leaning down, he pressed his nose and mouth against the top of the small head and breathed in the smell of little boy sweat and Michigan spring.

'I'm going to miss you,' he said. The child nodded and hugged tighter. They stood for a few moments, arms around each other, until Curtis broke free, dragged a dirty hand across his wet eyes and ran after the ball.

'Where's Laurie?' Scott called after the running boy.

'Kitchen. Makin' lasagna.'

This earned an approving smile. 'What'd you do to deserve that?'

'Miss Keller put a check mark in my planner 'cause I had a real good day.' He gave a 'How do you like that?' look and reached out for a fist bump.

'Nice. That's two for two this week. Three more and you stay up late on Friday.'

'Popcorn *and* a movie. Till *ten*.' The boy's mouth twisted in exaggerated dismay. 'But Laurie wants to watch, too, since it's our last one, so it's gotta be a movie a *girl* wants to see. No splosions or anything.'

'Still, ten o'clock bedtime rocks, right?'

Curtis brightened. '*And* popcorn.'

'So, nail the next three days. I'd better go check in. More hoops after dinner?'

'Maybe. But I have to read tonight. Laurie said. *And* practice math.'

Scott smiled at the pretend anger. The boy thrived on the expectations and rules at the Coffmans' house, but he was old enough to know he wasn't supposed to admit it. Scott played along. 'School's important, Little Man. Come in soon for dinner.'

He bent to pick up his things and started for the front door. Behind him he heard a loud '*Dang it!*' as the ball, he guessed, came short of the net once again.

Pushing the door closed behind him, Scott set his keys on the front entryway table and inhaled deeply: garlic, tomato, basil, cheese.

'Laur?' he called. 'Smells fantastic in here.'

He dropped his briefcase at his feet and bent to examine a floor nail that had worked its way loose and now threatened to catch on the next sock that ran across it. Pushing the nail down with his heel, he checked the rest of the entryway for others. It was ten years since he had resanded these floors. He put a hand reflexively on the small of his back.

His wife's vision of a dream house hadn't exactly matched their fixer-upper budget. Restoring the hundred-year-old 'needs love' colonial had involved a three-page to-do list and every weekend and evening for over a year. It was the price of entry, they told themselves, to the kind of house she had always wanted and he was determined to give her: a big, rambling place with wood floors, built-in shelves and two fireplaces. Full of character and, one day, children.

He ran a flat hand over the entryway wall. Removing all the layers of wallpaper took them two months alone. Then there was all the painting - the same neutral Warm Ecru throughout the house with a bold-colored accent wall in every room, carefully chosen after they compared several patches of different shades of multiple colors. They joked about putting the paint department guy at the hardware store on their Christmas card list.

He reached the doorway to the kitchen and leaned against the frame. His wife was bent over the oven, her large-bellied profile still a surprise to him. She hadn't changed out of her work clothes, though she had captured her wavy blond mane in a ponytail.

'Smells fantastic,' he said again.

'Oh, hi there, you. I didn't hear you.' She set the lasagna on the stovetop.

He crossed the room to kiss her. 'He had a good day, I hear.' Tipping his head over the lasagna, he inhaled again. 'Mmmm. Glad he did. I've been craving your lasagna myself lately.'

She made a face and put a hand on her stomach. 'That makes two of you. I can barely stand the smell of it.' In

response to his look of concern, she waved a hand. 'It's nothing. We had fattoush salad at lunch from that new place near the office and it was a little too oily. Anyway, don't get too excited about the good day. I talked to Miss Keller when I picked him up. She's going easy on him this week because of the transition. He only met half his behavior goals, but she decided to give him full credit. I think she's worried if she doesn't help him build some positive momentum, he'll fall apart completely by Friday.'

'Maybe Miss Keller knows a way to keep me from falling apart,' Scott said. Sighing, he moved aside the curtain on the small window above the sink and spied on the boy in the driveway until a hand on his back reminded him whom he was supposed to be paying attention to. He let the curtain drop and turned to his wife.

'I'm surprised you're going along with the leniency,' he said. 'Lasagna, when he didn't really meet all his goals?' All year, Laurie had been the one to lead the discipline charge. He put a hand on her round stomach. 'Impending motherhood's making you soft, huh?'

She lifted a shoulder. 'I was going to make it anyway, no matter what I heard from Miss Keller. I wanted to be sure he had it one more time before he leaves. I'll do spaghetti tomorrow, and let him help bake cookies for dessert. Homemade pizza on Thursday. I thought about baking a cake on Friday, and you could grill burgers on Saturday. All his favorites, you know? Although I'm tempted to have him eat nothing but vegetables and fruit until he leaves, just to get some nutrients in him before he goes back.'

Scott winced.

'Sorry,' she said.

'No, it's okay. There's no use pretending. He's not moving into the Ritz when he leaves here, and that's the reality. And it's okay - at least, that's what I've told myself a hundred times a day for the past few weeks.' He closed his eyes as if reciting a mantra. 'It's going to be okay. Even if he eats cold

ravioli from a can and only showers once a week and goes back to all his old stunts. All of that is better than being separated from his mother. Even if she lets him get away without doing homework, sends him to school without eating breakfast, the best thing for him is to be with his mom.'

'All of that is entirely true,' Laurie said, and he could sense the small tinge of frustration in her voice. 'And it almost sounds like you believe it, this time.' She didn't add 'finally,' but he knew she was thinking it.

'Almost,' he said. She started to speak, and to avoid hearing what he knew was coming, he jumped in ahead of her. 'Thanks for picking him up, by the way. Sorry about the eleventh-hour change of plan. So, can I help with anything in here? Set the table?'

It worked. She handed him three glasses and a basket of rolls, armed herself with cutlery and paper napkins and led him into the dining room. 'You're welcome, but I thought the whole point of having Pete cover practice this week was to give you more time at home, not more time for last-minute meetings with parents. Why didn't you ask the woman to wait till next week?'

She spoke in the too-light tone he recognized as reproach wrapped in politeness, her question more of a challenge. She had posed similar ones many times: Why did he get up early Saturday mornings to make the thirty-minute drive to inner-city Detroit, when he could be sleeping late? Half the kids who attended the Saturday tutoring program he ran were only there for the free pizza lunch anyway, didn't he see that? Why did he spend his summer evenings at the run-down outdoor court in front of the school, playing pickup with kids most teachers were thrilled to have a two-month break from, or be freed of entirely, now that they had gone on to high school?

Scott held his palms toward her, begging forgiveness. 'You know how my parent-teacher conference nights go at that

school. I read *Sports Illustrated* for an hour with maybe one or two people bothering to stop by. If someone's going to finally get involved in their kid's education, I've got to be there to meet with them. If I put her off till next week, there's no guarantee she'd show.'

'You can't single-handedly save every student at Franklin Middle School.'

'I know. I won't get to all of them. Three years isn't enough time.' He flashed a lopsided grin and hoped it was irresistible.

She let out a breath as she returned to the kitchen. 'That was not the point I was making, and you know it.' Following, he reached in the fridge for a beer and opened it, then filled a glass of water from the tap. He handed her the glass and raised his bottle. She clinked her glass against it, took a sip and made a face, a hand on her stomach.

'You sure you're okay?' he asked.

She sighed. 'You know how it's been. I eat one wrong thing and it throws me off the rest of the day.'

He raised his beer again. 'Here's hoping the last trimester will be better.' The last trimester was two weeks away. She was due July 15.

'Hopefully.' She set the glass on the counter and kept her gaze fixed on it. 'I never feel like it's the right time to say this, and it's not now. But I really think having our life back is going to make things better.' She caught his expression and quickly added, 'Or, not "better" necessarily. Just, you know, easier. Being able to come straight home from work and sit? Relax? Instead of having to be taxi driver, afternoon snack server, homework supervisor, all of that?'

Scott looked out the window again at the boy in the driveway and didn't answer. He didn't have a list of things he'd rather do than spend time with Curtis.

'Would you rather sit by yourself and read or come and shoot hoops?' Curtis had asked once. 'Laurie says I have to ask you what you'd rather do, instead of just expecting you

to come out and play every time.’ Scott dropped his book to the floor. ‘I’d always rather be with you. But would you rather shoot hoops alone and be unopposed, so you can tell yourself later you were the best out there? Or have me come out and wipe the court with you?’

Would you rather. It had become their language. A second-grade boy’s version of ‘I love you, too.’ Would you rather eat glass or walk on it? Would you rather swallow a handful of live spiders or stand for an hour in a roomful of bats?

Scott heard Laurie clear her throat behind him. Would you rather keep watching the boy and have your wife ticked off for the rest of the night, or pay attention to her? He turned from the window.

‘I’m going to miss him, too,’ she said. She reached in the drawer for a knife and started slicing the lasagna. ‘But I’m focusing on the bright side now, and that’s what you need to do. I’ve already planned out next week: Monday, I’m coming home from the office, sitting on the couch with that stack of baby books I haven’t had a chance to read, and not moving till dinnertime.’ She pointed her knife at him. ‘I’m counting on my husband to take me out to dinner that night. Maybe even a movie after. When’s the last time we had a date night?’

She paused, waiting for him to notice his cue. He gave his impression of an eager nod and, satisfied, she went on. ‘Tuesday, I’m finally getting that pregnancy massage the girls at the office gave me the certificate for. I cannot wait.’ She put a hand on her lower back and rubbed. ‘Wednesday . . . well, I’ve only gotten to Tuesday in my plans. The rest of the week will probably involve a lot of sitting with my feet up, reading, in absolute silence.’

‘Nice.’

‘Think of everything you’ll be able to do in your newfound spare time,’ she said. ‘Reading baby books with me for starters. We’re six months along and about six months

behind in learning what's going on in there.' She indicated her belly and he put a hand on it. She covered his with hers, leaned against the stove and smiled. 'Sometimes, I still can't believe it, you know? After all this time. A baby. In this house. In July.' Her smile widened. 'Can you believe it?'

'I'm a grinning idiot every time someone asks me about it,' Scott said. 'So Pete tells me.' Pete Conner was a fellow English teacher at Franklin, assistant basketball coach to Scott and his closest friend.

She snapped her fingers. 'Oh, I almost forgot. Bundles of Joy called. That crib we looked at? The one with the claw feet, that was already sold? Turns out they have another one coming in on consignment, end of the week or Monday. It's gray, but a few coats of paint will change that. They're going to put our name on it.'

'Great news on the crib. Not so much on the painting.'

'Come on, it'll be fun. And only one room this time, right?'

He squinted, letting her know he was on to her. It might only be one room, but he had seen her to-do list for the nursery and it was as long as the one she had made for their attack on the entire first floor. She laughed and punched his shoulder. 'Stop,' she said. 'You're going to love decorating as much as I am.'

'Yeah, I know,' he said. 'I'll go get the kid.'

The front door flew open before he reached it and Curtis fired himself through at a run. At the last second, Scott opened his arms to catch him, Curtis laughing at the impact. Reluctantly, Scott pulled himself away and put a hand on the boy's shoulder, steering him toward the kitchen. 'Wash your hands, LeBron. It's dinnertime.'

Mara

AFTER THE BUS left, Mara stood at the kitchen counter and ran a hand over the cool granite. This was her favorite room in the house. She had always found it so seductive, with its sleek, gunmetal granite counters run through with a thin line of limestone green, its tall, rich-warm cherry cabinets, its sexy slate floor, lighter gray than the granite but with a delicate vein of the same limestone green.

These days, the room posed a few challenges for her, but she still loved it. The oven door felt heavier every day and it took a practiced combination of arm, leg and hip movements for her to open and close it. The countertop had to be given a wide berth; she had plenty of hip-level bruises to remind her how painful the granite could be on impact. And the beautiful slate floor would not be trifled with; when she lost her grip on a glass or plate, she knew not to waste time hoping it survived and, instead, walked immediately to the pantry for the broom and dustpan.

Tom was always urging her to spend more time on the soft couches and carpeted floors of the living room and family room, rather than the hard wooden chairs or bar stools in the kitchen. But Mara loved the way the sun streamed through the sliding glass doors that led from the kitchen to the backyard. The suncatcher hanging in the doorway harnessed the light and shot it in concentrated rays into the kitchen, a million laser beams of color that always infused her with energy, even on days that followed sleepless nights