

## Snow in March

### **Anna**

When Ava started inside me, sudden and surprising like snow in March, I didn't have time to ask myself the reasons for such a miracle. I was working too hard, worrying too hard. With all the practical problems and the morning sickness and trying to stay awake during my night shifts, I didn't have much time left to consider what was happening: a human being had taken up residence in my belly, and was growing, growing. Somebody with eyes and ears and hands and legs and a heart. And more; she was more than a body and its parts. A soul lived inside this body-in-the-making, a consciousness, a set of feelings and emotions and thoughts like sparks inside her tiny brain.

I fretted about how I'd look after a baby, with my shifts and little money and no family at hand to help, while the man who did this to me in the first place was lost in one crazy project or another. He was forever wheeling and dealing somewhere while I threw up and cried and surveyed the wards full of new mums, their babies beside them in plastic cots, not quite believing I would be one of them soon. I

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couldn't sleep, and when I did, I had strange dreams, dreams of water and the sea and grey waves swallowing me. And then Toby would caress my barely-there bump and promise me the world, promise our baby the world – I didn't believe him any more, of course, but I didn't want my child to grow up without a father, like me.

I knew she was a girl. And not just any girl – she was *Ava*. I loved her with an intensity that blew me away. Somehow, in the lottery of procreation, one I witnessed every day in my job, this baby, *this* baby and no other, among the millions of possible genetic combinations, had been given to me. An old rhyme came into my mind, one my Scottish grandmother used to sing:

*Of all the babies who swam in the sea  
Ava was the one for me . . .*

While I was making beds, or fetching nappies for the midwives, or cleaning up mess, I was aware of her, like a constant song in the back of my mind. My belly grew, the fears grew, my love for her grew. In this city of eight million people, I thought as I contemplated the London skyline out of the staffroom window, there was now one more.

Months went by as my secret came into the light, my bump too big to hide. Ava talked to me in every way but words. *I know you, baby – I've known you forever*, I thought as I chose curtains for her nursery, and a Moses basket, and I dreamt of the day I'd hold her in my arms. *I love you, I've*

## *Keep Me Safe*

*loved you forever*, I whispered to her as we lay in bed in the middle of the day, waiting for another exhausting night shift.

I lay half naked with a little thing breaking me from the inside, my body clamping onto itself over and over again. When she finally came out, after what seemed like days, I looked into her eyes, semi-blind and alien black, and I had the strangest thought: that I had fooled myself believing I knew her, this little soul that had sat inside me waiting, this creature I'd been a vessel for.

I didn't know her at all. I had no idea who she was.

I never told anyone about what came into my mind the moment she was born – about the way I didn't recognise her like I thought I would, and how that feeling of *of course, it was you all along* never happened for me. A sense of knowing the creature that has been inside you for nine months and finally getting to meet her – it wasn't like that. I didn't know her, I never had known her. She was somebody other from the little life I had imagined.

It would have been impossible to explain such a weird sensation. People don't talk about these things anyway, and your head is all over the place after you've given birth. You're bound to have strange thoughts.

I soon forgot all about it as Ava grew into herself and I grew into my new life, a life where it was Ava and Anna, our little family.

My daughter's eyes have lost their alienness and now she's fully here, fully herself. Now, I do know her. Ava

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Elizabeth Hart, six years old, happy and chatty and lively and fearless like I never was, so different from me and yet so much mine, a part of Toby and me and yet herself.

But when it all began, when Ava told me about a life she had without me, with people I didn't know – that day I thought again of the moment she was born. I thought of the moment they placed her gently in my arms, wrapped in a white blanket, my blood still encrusted in her hair, and she opened those other-worldly eyes and the first thing I thought was *I love you*, and the second was *Where were you before?*