

ALICE AND LARISSA

**LEONORA
DESAR**

I'm Alice and my sister is Larissa. Larissa says we're going to be born now any day.

Larissa says a lot of things. She says she's got Daddy's looks and Mama's mystery and our Aunt Carrie's sense of mischief. When I ask her how she knows these things from inside Mama's tummy, she just says, Because. Because I'm Larissa, and I just know.

But I know things too. I'm the big sister—not big as in *big*, big as in *older* and *smarter*. I know our daddy is making us a rocking horse for when we get born. It is blue like the sea, the sea I live in when I dream.

In my dreams Larissa and I are whales like in the book Mama reads to us from the outside about Jonah and the big fish. I'm a big whale and Larissa's a little whale, and we each have our own belly. I can feel the wet against my belly—it is mine and not Larissa's too—and this makes me feel glad and guilty at the same time. In Mama's tummy we're attached from the neck down to our belly, our two heads floating like quail eggs from one spine. We can pass our thoughts over the blue bone of our rib.

Like when Larissa thinks, When I'm born I'm going to find a baby boy to kiss. She eavesdrops when Mama goes out with the other mommies. She doesn't hear how Mama's voice can turn low and cold; she only hears the babies who have been born, the ones on the outside. She thinks, That one drools, and that one's a mama's boy, and that Kenny Brewster has the cutest bottom lip. She says she knows this by the way he cries and by his silence.

Some silence around here would be nice for a change, I say. Don't you ever shut up? But when she sleeps the guilt creeps back like firefish up my skin. I wrap my arms around our neck, whisper thoughts to Larissa like kisses down our rib.

Larissa whispers, What do you want to be when you get big? She says, When I'm big I'll be an astronaut. When I'm big I'll have three husbands. When I'm big I'll be a queen.

I say nothing. How can I tell her I wish for the wetness of my dream belly? To know what it's like to be alone.

I just say how strange Mama's been acting ever since she found out there are two of us with just one belly. She used to read to us about a lot of things—sleepy princesses and grouchy queens and some lady who lost her slipper. But now it's always Jonah this and Jonah that. Maybe it's because Daddy is so quiet. His silence is the color of the sea, of the rocking horse that sits unfinished in the shed.

Mama says, You have to have faith, Jim. She says, I believe in the goodness of the Lord. She scares me—I imagine fish dripping from her lips, her arms coiled with seaweed. Her voice whispers like seaweed—Heavenly Father, I plead the blood of the lamb over all children.

Larissa says we should whisper to Heavenly Father if Mama does. She whispers for boy babies with chubby kissing lips, for Daddy to paint our rocking horse pink now that he knows we're girls. I whisper, Please give me my dream belly.

When I wake up Mama and Daddy are fighting. Daddy says, What kind of life will these babies have? They're never going to be able to do anything on their own. Mama just keeps reading. Her voice is the lullaby of the whale, the way it must have sounded to Jonah when he was trapped.

That night I tell Larissa to think of the softest kissing lip, of the sound Kenny Brewster makes when his mama keeps him safe inside her arms. I tell her I will keep us safe. When she falls asleep I wrap my arms around our neck, squeeze and squeeze until our rib doesn't make a sound.