

Paula Manns

I still can't believe he insisted on taking a paternity test.

Paula Manns shut out the absurd thought. Darryl would come to his senses as soon as he heard his daughter's first cry. None of Paula's tears had worked with him. She'd cried out many nights—not just to Darryl, but to God too. It seemed as if both had turned a deaf ear to her.

“Push, Paula. Just one more push and you can see your baby girl,” Dr. Seagroves coaxed from behind the hospital sheet. She patted the side of Paula's thigh. “Relax your legs.”

Paula dug her nails into her husband's hand and gripped the bed rail with her right. Darryl winced in pain. Good. It paled in comparison to the writhing contractions she'd been enduring over the past four hours, not to mention the heavy burden from carrying their crumbling marriage on her shoulders over the last year and a half. At the point when she'd seen the light at the end of the tunnel, it was snuffed out by his attitude. She'd only held on this long because of the promises she'd made to God. To fight. To honor the vows she'd made before Him.

The anger Paula used to harbor toward Darryl had dissipated, but it had left the residue of hurt on her soul.

Another contraction pierced Paula's lower back. She didn't know how much more she could endure. She'd determined to have a natural birth experience this time. The side effects from the epidural from her son's delivery left her with back pain for nearly two months afterwards. Micah was five now, and she still remembered the agony, although the obstetrician said her epidural wasn't the culprit. Whatever. Paula planned to endure the labor without any help from drugs, but when she changed her mind and requested the epidural an hour ago, the resident looked at her apologetically and said, “Eight centimeters. You're too far along.”

Too far, Paula thought. Too far is telling a committed wife that he's going to take a paternity test when he's the one stepping out in the middle of the night. Paula's legs begin to quiver, keeping pace with her trembling bottom lip.

Everything. Everything was too much. Tears spilled from her eyes.

“It's okay,” Dr. Seagroves said, not realizing Paula wept about more than the contractions. “Push and hold it for ten,” Dr. Seagroves nearly whispered. “She's almost here.”

Paula grunted while the nurse helped push her knee to her chest. “You've been saying that for the last thirty-three minutes,” she said through clenched teeth. She looked at the large, round, white-faced clock on the wall. The red second hand lapped past the six again. Paula tucked her chin into her chest and bore down.

The nurse counted. “One, two . . . four . . . nine, ten.”

“I can’t do it anymore,” Paula said, falling back against the back of the raised hospital bed. She pushed back the sweaty bangs from her forehead and used the oversized sleeve of her hospital gown to wipe her face. Exhaustion had stolen her strength and reason. “Do what you can without me.”

The moment the comment left her lips, Paula realized how ludicrous it must’ve sounded. Even though Dr. Seagroves’ mouth was hidden by a surgical mask, the obstetrician’s smile surfaced through the twinkle in her hazel eyes.

“Come on, honey,” Darryl said, leaning in close to her ear. “You’ve gotten this far. You can do it.” He looked around at the labor and delivery team in the room. Their eyes were all focused on the event happening under the green sheet below Paula’s waist. “Besides, you can’t walk around with a half-delivered baby,” he said with a half chuckle.

She couldn’t believe he was amused at a time like this. Paula cut her eyes at Darryl and decided not to slash him with words. Besides, another contraction paralyzed her thoughts before she could think of what to say. A groan like a wounded bear rose from Paula’s belly, and she pushed with the last ounce of strength left in her fatigued body, delivering her daughter into the world.

“Five-oh-three p.m.,” one of the nurses said.

Through her blurred, teary eyes, Paula watched Dr. Seagroves suction fluid from the baby’s mouth and nose. After her daughter’s first cry screeched from her tiny lungs, Dr. Seagroves wiped a jelly-like substance from the baby’s face and body, then lay her on Paula’s chest.

“Does this cutie-pie have a name yet?” the doctor asked.

“Gabrielle Elise Manns,” Paula said.

Looking at Gabrielle, she knew the name was perfect. What made it even more precious was that Gabrielle’s initials announced what a priceless jewel she was to the world—GEM. Neither her emerald and diamond pendant nor any of the expensive stones she’d racked up in her jewelry armoire over the years compared to the experience and joy of giving birth to another child. Memory of the labor pains vanished. The only thing she felt was love.

Darryl bent over and kissed Paula’s forehead; his lips lingered—soft and tender. She couldn’t believe it. She guessed the moment had gotten to him too. Paula couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt such a genuine touch from him. At times like this she saw the hope for their marriage’s restoration. This could be the moment things changed. The fruit of her prayers was within fingertips’ reach. She wanted to reach out and grab it before . . .

Darryl’s cell phone rang, and the vision dissipated. He unclipped it from his waist just as he accepted the sterile scissors from Dr. Seagroves to cut the umbilical cord. The lifeline between Paula and her daughter dangled between two metal clamps waiting for Darryl to disconnect it.

I don’t believe this. He better not answer that phone.

Paula glared at him, her facial expression speaking the words that her mouth didn’t. A musical tone played, signifying that he’d powered his cell phone off. Her silent threat had worked.

After Darryl cut through the rubbery cord, a nurse scooped Gabrielle from Paula's chest. The labor and delivery team worked methodically in the corner of the room to check the baby's vitals and administer a series of tests to measure her responsiveness. Paula had read enough in her baby magazines to know what all of the poking and prodding on her newborn was all about.

"Seven pounds, nine ounces," the nurse announced. She lifted Gabrielle from the scale, the baby's head now donned with a pink and blue striped knit cap pulled down to her eyebrows.

"I'll get your mother," Darryl said, his voice flat with little enthusiasm. He pecked Paula on the forehead, but this time the kiss was dry and rehearsed. More for show than anything else.

The drop of hope that Paula had now fizzled away.

Darryl zipped the jacket of his fleece pullover up to his neck, then tightened the drawstring to the matching black fleece pants. He had his cell phone powered back on and up to his ear before the delivery room door closed behind him. The chill that emanated through Paula's body wasn't from the thirty-eight-degree February weather.

Paula's mother, Rosanna Gilmer, had been camped out in the waiting room with Paula's five-year-old son, Micah. He was overly anxious to see his baby sister and had been asking about her every day and checking the calendar Paula had tacked on the refrigerator. Micah kept a countdown of the number of days until the date Paula had marked with a smiley face. Gabrielle came eight days early.

The nurse brought Gabrielle back to Paula. The infant was wrapped tight as a burrito, swaddled up to her chin in a white receiving blanket. Paula lifted the child to her face and kissed Gabrielle's perfect pink lips. Only minutes before she'd been detached physically from Paula's body, but from the moment Paula found out she was pregnant, Gabrielle had been attached forever to her mother's heart.

"What number is this for you?" the nurse asked in a Jamaican accent. She rolled away a silver tray of sterile tools.

"Gabrielle makes two," Paula said. "And probably the last."

"You're a young lady," the nurse said, flicking her hand in the air. "If you can do two, you can do three. No problem. I've got six. All of them two years apart. Four boys, two girls."

I haven't even gotten stitched up yet and this woman is talking to me about having another baby.

The hospital door pushed open, and Micah bounded inside. Darryl grabbed his arm before his eager son could make a beeline for the bed.

"Hold up a minute, son," Darryl said. "Let the doctor finish with Mommy, and you can see your little sister."

Micah stood on his tiptoes, craned his neck, and tried to wrestle his arm out of Darryl's grip. There were days it seemed he grew taller from the time she dropped him off and picked him up from kindergarten.

"Hi, sweetie," Paula said. She blew a kiss to her son, who returned one of his own. "Remember how important it is for you to be a big boy now?"

Micah jutted out the strong and angular chin that he'd inherited from his father. He nodded his head and pulled at the bottom of his blue T-shirt. "That's why I get to wear this," he said, standing proudly with his shoulders back and chest out.

"That's right," Paula said.

While shopping at one of her favorite online children's boutiques, she'd found him a shirt that said, I'm the big brother. She'd even bought Gabrielle a newborn pink onesie that said, I'm the little sister.

Paula outlined the shape of Gabrielle's eyebrows with her index finger. It seemed like just yesterday that she'd held Micah the same way. Loving him unconditionally. The way she thought Darryl would always love her. She looked over at Darryl, who was busy texting messages from his cell phone.

Life was different when Micah had come along. Darryl had hovered over his first son as if his life depended on the baby's breath. Instead of his cell phone, he'd had a camera strapped to one hand and a video camera in the other. Somewhere along the way the frame to their picture-perfect life had shattered, and Paula was still trying to salvage the pieces and put them back together again. She'd made a promise to God that she'd do whatever it took. That was before she knew how much it would take.

My strength is made perfect in weakness.

"Okay. That'll do it," Dr. Seagroves said. She pulled the mask off her mouth and slid back on the rolling stool. "Congratulations. You can go ahead and nurse her if you'd like. They'll come from the nursery to get her shortly."

Micah ran to the bed as soon as Darryl let go of his arm. After three minutes of examining his sister's face and asking a barrage of questions, Micah stretched out on the pull-out couch and forgot about everything except his new handheld video game and the iPod his father had surprised him with.

"Come on, Grandma," he said with his feet propped up on the arm of the couch. "You want to try and play again?"

"I can't half see that thing, Micah," Rosanna said.

"Okay," he said, content to play by himself. He stuffed the buds of his headset into his ears.

Rosanna crept to the hospital bed once the staff cleared the room. The recent flare-up of her arthritis had temporarily stolen her quick steps, brought on, she said, by the rainy weather.

"Grandbaby number four," Rosanna said, her chest puffed out just as much as Micah's had been. "You don't know how blessed you are, little muffin." She tapped the tip of Gabrielle's nose. "Now if you can only get your daddy to act right," she whispered. Rosanna grunted and crossed her arms. The slits of her eyes were sharp enough to cut Darryl straight down the middle of his personal-trainer-toned body.

"Don't do it, Ma," Paula said. "Now's not the time."

Rosanna hoisted her fake leather purse farther up on her shoulder. She'd directed her comments toward Darryl even though she didn't so much as cock her neck to look in his direction. "And I wish you would try to pull that mess about she's not your baby," she mumbled, looking over to make sure Micah didn't hear her. "I'll lose what Christianity I have left."

“Seems like if you can lose your Christianity that easy, you never had it in the first place,” Darryl said to his mother-in-law, not once looking up from his electronic gadgets.

Paula hoped her mother would call a truce.

She did.

Rosanna looked at Darryl. He looked smug that he'd delivered the final blow. He rocked back on his heels and leaned against the eggshell-white wall. From the look of the smudges around him, other fathers had taken residence at the same post.

Paula pursed her lips and blew out a stream of air. She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath.

“My baby, Gabrielle,” Paula cooed, soothing the newborn and the storm around her.

Darryl finally walked over to hold his daughter. Paula lifted Gabrielle up to him. She had the same thick eyebrows as her father. He touched his forehead to hers. He seemed to be breathing in her innocence. If only he was as guiltless as he looked, Paula thought.