

JAR OF NAILS

By Kali VanBaale

What happened at the baby shower was inevitable, Jessie realized later. After all, the dentist had informed her just the day before that her teeth were showing evidence of grinding. Most adult grinders, he'd said, develop the habit as a response to stress. Was she experiencing an increased or unusual level of stress lately? Yes, Jessie nodded, her chin crinkling the ill-fitting paper bib around her neck and tears springing to her eyes. "I'm having problems with my husband." And she had proceeded to spew the details of her and Dave's terrible fight. The dentist had uncomfortably cleared his throat, wrote her a prescription for a nighttime bite guard, and abruptly excused himself for a root canal emergency.

So, with her jaw clenched and still aching, she arrived at the Waterford Tea Room, a 19th century bed and breakfast in the trendy section of downtown Minneapolis, for the baby shower. Even with several minutes to spare she still had to park on the street and totter up the gravel drive, her spiked heels—normally saved for weddings or special dinner dates with her husband but appropriate for this type of shower crowd—sinking into the soft ground. She carried a glittery pink bag containing a package of disposable diapers, wipes, lotion, and two types of soap—lavender and organic. Unable to choose between the two, she had purchased both. She knew the gifts were impersonal for a close friend but by the time she'd gotten around to shopping the registry had been barren. As Jessie slipped into the grand foyer she looked for Kristi, the new mother, her friend since Minnesota State, where they had met as business majors. Each had dated, and later married, a player on the lacrosse

team. They had remained friends over the years, socializing occasionally, and eventually buying houses five streets apart in the same development. Even though their college-based friendship hadn't always worn well under the harsh lights of adulthood, Jessie still enjoyed Kristi's company and was genuinely happy about the baby.

"You made it."

Jessie turned and found herself face-to-face with Meredith, the hostess of the shower and one of Kristi's new neighborhood friends.

"I'm not late, am I?" Jessie asked.

"No, no," Meredith waved, a gesture graceful and controlled. "We just weren't sure you'd come." She carefully brushed her long hair from her shoulder.

Had it been anyone else, Jessie would have asked what she meant, but Meredith was a mere acquaintance and Jessie felt intimidated by her. Tall and slender, with insane cheekbones, Meredith was cool, aloof, and gorgeous. She was like the white version of Naomi Campbell, according to Jessie's husband Dave, and probably threw her cell phone at the help when she was pissed. This comment, despite hearing Dave repeat it perhaps a dozen times, always made Jessie laugh. And Kristi talked about her constantly—*Meredith* says, *Meredith* does, *Meredith's* kids—which only made Jessie feel even more insecure around her.

"Let me take that for you," Meredith said, lifting the bag from Jessie's hand.

Jessie straightened the leather belt of her dress and moved the clasp of her necklace to the back of her neck, reminding herself to unclench her jaw. She followed Meredith into the formal tearoom where the heavy Edwardian furniture had been decorated with clusters of fresh peonies in crystal vases. A gourmet two-tier cake commanded the center of the

refreshment table. The bottom tier, decorated in a realistic-looking row of toy blocks, spelled out the new baby's name. *Kabrlee*.

Shit. Jessie had spelled the name wrong on the card, even though she had seen the correct spelling on the invitation. For a moment she considered sneaking over to her gift to ditch the envelope with the offensive spelling but Meredith was in close proximity to the gifts and Jessie preferred to stay as far away from her as possible.

"Jess!" Kristi, bearing a small layer of pregnancy insulation around her middle but otherwise just as bubbly and unchanged from their college days, approached and offered a light, single-armed hug as she cradled the baby in the other.

Jessie stooped slightly and folded back a corner of pink blanket to get a closer look at the child, a pinched-faced girl with a large, misshapen head and lightly jaundiced skin. Jessie couldn't help clenching her jaw again. "Oh, she's so...tiny," she said, forcing a smile for her old friend. "Congratulations."

"I know! Thank you! She looks just like Chad, don't you think?" Kristi reached out to squeeze her hand. "I'm so glad you're here. Why don't you sit with Tricia? You remember Tricia from our housewarming party, right? She lives between me and Meredith."

Kristi turned to greet another guest but still held tight to Jessie's hand, forcing Jessie to stand awkwardly at Kristi's side until she unceremoniously released it. Jessie inched her way through the crowd of chattering women, most of whom she didn't recognize, to an empty seat in the last row of folding chairs next to Tricia. Tricia was a dermatologist married to an anesthesiologist. The only couple Jessie knew who had an actual live-in nanny. Dave liked to joke that Tricia and her husband's dual "ologist" was from the Latin term meaning "more money than God," but Jessie always had to force herself to laugh at that one.

“Jessie!” Tricia said, moving her jacket from an empty seat next to her. “I’m so glad you decided to come. Seems like ages since we talked. How’s the job going? Are you still at that business consulting place? What’s the name?”

Jessie sat and smoothed the hem of her dress. “Project Partners. I was just promoted to a senior consultant.”

Tricia, friendly enough, also made Jessie nervous, but for reasons different than Meredith. Tricia was short and plain and wore Birkenstock sandals for pretty much every occasion, but she was also east coast and intense and sometimes made conversations feel like interrogations.

“What exactly is it you do again? I forget.”

“We define and manage project portfolios so that our clients can better achieve their overall goals.” Jessie hated the way her explanation always sounded—like she was reading her job description off a cheesy brochure.

“Oh, I see. Interesting. What’s this promotion?” Tricia studied her face, leaning uncomfortably close so that Jessie could smell her breath—coffee and possibly something onion-y from lunch.

“I handle my own clients and oversee junior consultants. It’s a lot more responsibility but I’m really enjoying the challenge. I just signed a huge company—”

“I always say it’s good to be someone’s boss,” Tricia said with a congratulatory pat to Jessie’s knee, then turned away to survey the room. Jessie was relieved. She was too emotionally drained to deal with a baby shower *and* conversation with Tricia.

From the front of the room, Meredith clapped her hands. “Ladies, let’s start the game. Seven diapers, each with a different melted candy bar inside, will be passed around. The object is to guess the name of the candy bar. You’re allowed to smell, touch and taste.”

“Oh, I love a good contest!” Kristi said and Jessie couldn’t help but think of the long-ago college night at Sharkey’s Bar when Kristi had entered a wet T-shirt contest and been awarded a free pitcher of beer for second place.

“God,” Tricia said under her breath. “I hate these stupid games. What is it with you Midwesterners and lame baby shower games? Chocolate shit diapers, so tacky. I would’ve expected something a little more tasteful from Meredith. She’s from Connecticut, for Christ’s sake.”

“I’ve never played this one,” Jessie said. She inspected the first diaper handed to her and made a face. “I agree. It’s kind of a disgusting game.”

“They played it at my sister-in-law’s shower, so you *know* it has to be moronic,” Tricia said, handing a second diaper to Jessie without even a glance at the contents. “By the way,” she leaned even closer and hoisted an enormous handbag onto her lap. “I know it’s like taboo to talk to other women about this, but I don’t care. I’m giving you the name of my fertility guy. I have his card somewhere in here.” She began digging through her bag.

Jessie shook her head. “Fertility guy?”

“Yeah, my doctor. You know, the specialist who helped me get pregnant with the twins. Kristi said you and Dave are having trouble getting pregnant.”

Jessie stared at her and swallowed hard, unsure how she’d sound when she opened her mouth to speak. “Dave said that we’re having trouble getting pregnant?”

“Kristi said he mentioned something to Chad when they played golf the other day. Just in passing, so don’t be pissed at him. Chad said he seemed upset.”

Jessie sat back in her chair and dropped her hands into the chocolate shit.

“Here it is,” Tricia said, handing Jessie a small white card. “Dr. Glowackie. Terrible name. Great doc.”

Jessie traded the diaper for the card and stared at the finely printed name, *Dr. James J. Glowackie, M.D., F.A.C.O.G.*

She held the card, leaving her chocolate fingerprints on the corner, and thought about the jar of nails. Shortly after college graduation, Jessie and Dave had dismantled Dave's homemade loft bed in his tiny fraternity house bedroom; they had pried the haphazardly assembled boards apart and dropped the nails into an empty box. The box was filled to the brim with nails by the time the job was finished, and Dave had inexplicably kept the box after the move.

Once they were settled comfortably into their new apartment, Dave brought out the box and placed it on a bathroom shelf, where it sat behind the extra rolls of toilet paper. Sometime before their wedding, he decided it would be funny if they used the nails in a humorous spin on the old "put a penny in a jar every time you have sex the first year of marriage, take one out every time after the first year, and you'll never get to the bottom of the jar." Get it? Nails? Dave had laughed and Jessie had laughed, too, because they'd always shared a weird, rather perverted sense of humor, one of the things Dave loved most about her, she knew.

For the first year, they faithfully took a nail from the box and placed it in an empty glass pickle jar on top of the bureau, a jar that rapidly filled. Then after their first anniversary, they'd faithfully removed the nails from the jar one at a time the past three years, though at a much slower rate, true to the old saying—even more slowly the year Dave lost his IT job and was out of work for several months, and then the summer Jessie's sister lived with them during an internship. Nevertheless, the supply was slowly but surely diminishing, and what the hell, Dave had said, once they emptied the jar, they'd start trying to have a baby. Let the

nails decide! Again, Jessie had laughed and agreed because it was such a “Dave and Jessie thing” to do.

Last fall, around the time they’d purchased the new house just five streets away from Kristi, the nails in the jar had finally begun to inch closer and closer to the bottom, and Dave, with his usual mixture of humor and seriousness, saw the timing as a sign, just like he’d said. What does it mean when we buy a bigger house in the right neighborhood at the same time we get down to our last dozen nails? Diaphragm burning ceremony! he’d proclaimed to the slightly drunken laughter of Jessie and dinner guests. We’ll then save the nails and build this kid a loft! It’ll become a goddamn family legacy! And they all knew that was exactly what he would do and the story told over wine and prime rib was perfectly offbeat and charming, just like Dave.

Then a month ago, they’d gotten down to their last nail, and suddenly Jessie stopped laughing. The last nail had remained there since, in the jar, lonely and abandoned.

“You know, I didn’t go to a baby shower for two years when I was trying to get pregnant,” Tricia said. “It was just too brutal.” She thrust another diaper into Jessie’s face. “Ugh. I can’t figure this one out. It smells like a Kit Kat but it looks too smooth.”

Jessie stared down at the chocolate smear. One morning she’d gone to the bureau for a pair of underwear, or a bra, and had looked up to see the last nail in the jar. Suddenly, she couldn’t breathe. She had felt a subtle tightening in her chest for some time, as the nail supply had depleted, but standing in front of the bureau and facing down the reality of the last nail, the tightness intensified painfully and terrified her.

“I don’t know what it is either,” Jessie said, passing the diaper to the woman on her left.

The change was instantaneous. She became restless and edgy, snapping at Dave over the way he parked the car, the way he spit toothpaste all over the bathroom faucet, how he buttered his toast on the kitchen counter without a plate and left a trail of crumbs that were surely tracked from one end of the house to the other. She started regularly working late on a project that wasn't due for another ten weeks. Dave noticed the change in her and started asking what was wrong, what was bothering her—nothing, *nothing*, she kept telling him. Everything is fine. But she had stopped having sex with him even though she longed to feel the comforting warm weight of him on top of her, and he'd noticed that too, of course, and asked if she was having an affair? No! she'd vehemently proclaimed, and the last nail remained in the jar.

Finally, during the terrible fight a few days before her dentist appointment, she had said the words that made Dave's face turn pale and made his lips slowly part in disbelief. Or despair.

I'm unsure if I want a baby.

He had slumped onto the couch. It's a big step, he'd said in a hoarse voice, it could be nerves or fear, that's natural. Maybe you just don't want one right now. No, Dave! she'd wanted to scream. I don't want one ever! And maybe I've never wanted one but ignored it because I figured my feelings would eventually change because I loved you so much, but here we are and my feelings haven't changed and I still don't want one. I could be happy with just the two of us, and I'm so sorry, I'm so fucking sorry! But she couldn't bring herself to say any of it because as long as she was just *unsure*—just nervous, like Dave said—she could pretend she hadn't had one of the cruelest changes of heart that could occur in a marriage, and she desperately didn't want to be *that* person in her marriage.

So there she was, just one day after the dentist had asked her if she had been grinding her teeth because of stress, at a goddamn baby shower holding shit chocolate diapers while everyone around her thought she was having trouble getting pregnant because that's what her husband told them, because it was, in Dave's mind, a smaller but less painful version of the truth.

"Jess, it's your turn to hold the baby!" Kristi said, materializing with her enormous milk-swollen breasts that would handily sweep first place in any wet T-shirt contest now.

Jessie pushed her chair back, the scraping sound of wood against wood quickly swooped up by the high ceilings. "Oh, no, really, I—"

"Seriously, Kristi," Tricia said, sitting up straight and putting her hand out as if directing traffic. "She doesn't want to hold the baby. Give her a break."

"Oh, I think it would good for her." Kristi leaned down with little Kahrlee bundled in her outstretched arms. She shifted the pink fleece bundle from the crook of her arm into Jessie's. Jessie scrambled to move the chocolate shit diaper from her lap and set the doctor's card down on top of her purse but she wasn't quick enough. Baby Kahrlee, the pink fleecy bundle, slipped through her arms and down her legs, like a child descending a playground chute, and slid soundlessly to the floor.

Jessie's hands flew to her mouth. Gasps. Chatter stopped. Silverware ceased its tinny scrape across china plates. Every woman in the room, sitting nearby or standing next to the cake or lingering by the door hoping to catch a light breeze, froze.

Kahrlee let out a healthy, screechy wail as Kristi snatched up the tightly bundled little body and clutched her to her chest. "Fuck!" she shrieked. "Kahrlee! Oh, my God!"

Within seconds every woman descended upon Kristi and the howling baby, producing cell phones to call for an ambulance, the nearest hospital, even a moment of

prayer from someone in the back. Jessie stood, her hands still clamped to her mouth, and backed away as a few women patted her back, murmuring, it's okay, it could have happened to anyone, it was an accident.

“Everyone, calm down!” Tricia shouted. “I’m a doctor.” She scooped Kahrlee out of Kristi’s arms and set her on the massive walnut sideboard where she quickly unwrapped the pink blanket. Kahrlee, no longer wailing, whimpered and kicked her legs in the air and attempted to stick her fist in her mouth. Tricia carefully prodded her fingers over every inch of her head, neck, back, arms and legs. She removed a doctor’s pen light from her bottomless purse (Jessie had seen her produce the same light at the housewarming party for a man who passed out after too many dirty martinis) and shone it in Kahrlee’s squinty eyes.

Kristi hovered at Tricia’s elbow, clutching an embroidered cloth napkin Meredith had handed to her while she stood with her arm wrapped tightly around Kristi’s shoulders.

Tricia straightened after a few moments. “Kristi,” she said, “the baby’s fine.” “Oh, thank you, Lord!” Kristi cried and a few women clapped.

“She was so tightly swaddled in that thick blanket,” Tricia said, “you probably could’ve tossed her down a flight of stairs and she would’ve been fine.” She snorted but stopped quickly when no one joined her. “You can take her to your pediatrician for a quick check if you want, but seriously, she’s fine.”

Jessie finally stepped forward. “Kristi,” she said, her voice hoarse and trembling. “I am so, so sorry. I, I don’t know what happened.”

Kristi lifted the baby from the table and pressed her cheek to Kahrlee’s downy hair-covered head. “She’s fine, it’s fine.”

“I’m just mortified,” Jessie continued. “I really can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

Kristi swiped her nose with the napkin and settled on Jessie's abandoned chair. "It's okay, Jess, really. It was an accident. I shouldn't have tried to force you to hold her with everything you're going through."

"Could've happened to anyone," Tricia said, replacing the light in her purse. "Babies get dropped more often than you'd think. Hell, both my twins rolled off the couch right in front of me."

Jessie briefly spied Dr. Glowackie's card crushed beneath Tricia's foot.

The crowd began to disperse and a few women returned to their seats while others wandered to the cake table to sample refreshments, many rehashing baby-dropping stories of their own.

Jessie slipped out of the tearoom, her purse clutched to her chest, and scurried toward the powder room. Tears burned her eyes and she could no longer stop them. She wasn't crying because she had dropped Kristi's baby, she was crying because she knew she would have to say it, out loud to Dave, that there was no *unsure*, there was no *nervous*, she didn't ever want a child, and she was probably going to lose her husband for it.

Jessie opened the bathroom door and was startled to find Meredith inside, sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, smoking a cigarette.

"Shut the door," she hissed.

Jessie whisked the door shut and then briefly wondered if Meredith had meant for her to *leave* and close the door behind her. Regardless, she slumped against the floral-papered wall and the tears flowed, running down her cheeks, dripping off her chin, staining the light satin fabric of her dress.

“Stop crying, Jessie.” Meredith lifted the lid of the toilet and tossed in her cigarette, where it sizzled. “That,” she said, looking hard at Jessie, “is the ugliest little baby I’ve seen in my life, even before you dropped it.”