

The Midwife's Confession

By Diane Chamberlain

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Dear Anna,
What I have to tell you is difficult to write, but I know it will be far more difficult for you to hear, and I'm so sorry…

The unfinished letter is the only clue Tara and Emerson have to the reason behind their close friend Noelle's suicide. Everything they knew about Noelle—her calling as a midwife, her passion for causes, her love for her friends and family—described a woman who *embraced* life.

Yet there was so much they *didn't* know.

With the discovery of the letter and its heartbreaking secret, Noelle's friends begin to uncover the truth about this complex woman who touched each of their lives—and the life of a desperate stranger—with love and betrayal, compassion and deceit.

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Editorial Review

Review
"A complex, heart-wrenching tale, Chamberlains' latest novel offers a Jodi Picoult-like story line yanked from the most shocking of headlines." ---Booklist

About the Author
Diane Chamberlain is the bestselling author of twenty novels, including The Midwife's Confession and The Secret Life of CeeCee Wilkes. Diane lives in North Carolina and is currently at work on her next novel. Visit her Web site at www.dianechamberlain.com and her blog at www.dianechamberlain.com/blog and her Facebook page at www.facebook.com/Diane.Chamberlain.Readers.Page.

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Noelle

Wilmington, North Carolina September 20I0

She sat on the top step of the front porch of her Sunset Park bungalow, leaning against the post, her eyes on the full moon. She would miss all this. The night sky. Spanish moss hanging from the live oaks. September air that felt like satin against her skin. She resisted the pull of her bedroom. The pills. Not yet. She had time. She could sit here all night if she wanted.

Lifting her arm, she outlined the circle of the moon with her fingertip. Felt her eyes burn. *"I love you, world,"* she whispered.

The weight of the secret pressed down on her suddenly, and she dropped her hand to her lap, heavy as a stone. When she'd awakened this morning, she'd had no idea that this would be the day she could no longer carry that weight. As recently as this evening, she'd hummed as she chopped celery and cucumbers and tomatoes for her salad, thinking of the fair-haired preemie born the day before—a fragile little life who needed her help. But when she sat down with her salad in front of the computer, it was as though two beefy, muscular arms reached out from her monitor and pressed their hands down hard on her head, her shoulders, compressing her lungs so that she couldn't pull in a full breath.

The very shape of the letters on her screen clawed at her brain and she knew it was time. She felt no fear—certainly no panic—as she turned off the computer. She left the salad, barely touched, on her desk. No need for it now. No desire for it. She got everything ready; it wasn't difficult. She'd been preparing for this night for a long time. Once all was in order, she came out to the porch to watch the moon and feel the satin air and fill her eyes and lungs and ears with the world one last time. She had no expectation of a change of heart. The relief in her decision was too great, so great that by the time she finally got to her feet, just as the moon slipped behind the trees across the street, she was very nearly smiling.

Tara Going upstairs to call Grace for dinner was becoming a habit. I knew I'd find her sitting at her computer, earbuds in her ears so she couldn't hear me when I tried to call her from the kitchen. Did she do that on purpose? I knocked on her door, then pushed it open a few inches when she didn't answer. She was typing, her attention glued to her monitor. "Dinner's almost ready, Grace," I said. "Please come set the table."

Twitter, our goldendoodle, had been stretched out beneath Grace's bare feet, but at the mention of "dinner"

he was instantly at my side. Not so my daughter.

"In a minute," she said. "I have to finish this."

I couldn't see the screen from where I stood, but I was quite sure she was typing an email rather than doing her homework. I knew she was still behind. That was what happened when you taught at your child's high school; you always knew what was going on academically. Grace had been an excellent student and one of the best writers at Hunter High, but that all changed when Sam died in March. Everyone cut her slack during the spring and I was hoping she'd pull it together this fall, but then Cleve broke up with her before he left for college, sending her into a tailspin. At least, I assumed it was the breakup that had pulled her deeper into her shell. How could I really know what was going on with her? She wouldn't talk to me. My daughter had become a mystery. A closed book. I was starting to think of her as the stranger who lived upstairs.

I leaned against the doorjamb and studied my daughter. We had the same light brown hair dusted with the same salon-manufactured blond highlights, but her long, thick mane had the smooth shiny glow that came with being sixteen years old. Somewhere along the way, my chin-length hair had lost its luster.

"I'm making pasta with pesto," I said. "It'll be done in two minutes."

"Is Ian still here?" She kept typing but glanced quickly out the window, where I supposed she could see Ian's Lexus parked on the street.

"He's staying for dinner," I said.

"He might as well move in," she said. "He's here all the time, anyway."

I was shocked. She'd never said a word about Ian's visits before, and he only came over once or twice a week now that Sam's estate was settled. "No, he's not," I said. "And he's been a huge help with all the paperwork, honey. Plus, he has to take over all Daddy's cases and some of his records are here in his home office, so—"

"Whatever." Grace hunched her shoulders up to her ears as she typed as if she could block out my voice that way. She stopped typing for a second, wrinkling her nose at her screen. Then she glanced up at me. "Can you tell Noelle to leave me alone?" she asked.

"Noelle? What do you mean?"

"She's always emailing me. She wants me and Jenny to—"

"Jenny and me."

She rolled her eyes and I cringed. *Stupid, stupid.* I wanted her to talk to me and then I critiqued what she said. "Never mind," I said. "What does she want you and Jenny to do?"

"Make things for her babies-in-need program." She waved her hand toward her monitor. "Now she's on this 'community work will look great on your college applications' kick."

"Well, it will."

"She's such a total whack job." She started typing again, fingers flying. "If you could compare her brain with

a normal brain on an MRI, I'm sure they'd look completely different."

I had to smile. Grace might be right. "Well, she brought you into the world and I'll always be grateful for that," I said.

"She never lets me forget it, either."

I heard the timer ringing downstairs. "Dinner's ready," I said. "Come on."

"Two seconds." She got to her feet, bending over the desk, still typing furiously. Suddenly she let out a yelp, hands to her face. She took a step back from the keyboard. "Oh, no," she said. "Oh, *no!*"

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, no," she said again, whispering the words this time as she dropped back into her chair, eyes closed.

"What is it, sweetie?" I started toward her as if I might somehow be able to fix whatever was wrong, but she waved me away.

"It's nothing." She stared at her monitor. "And I'm not hungry."

"You have to eat," I said. "You hardly ever eat dinner with me anymore."

"I'll get some cereal later," she said. "Just…right now, I have to fix something. Okay?" She gave me a look that said our conversation was over, and I backed away, nodding.

"Okay," I said, then added helplessly, "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

"She's having a meltdown," I said to Ian as I walked into the kitchen. "And she's not hungry."

Ian was chopping tomatoes for the salad but he turned to look at me. "Maybe I should go," he said.

"No way." I spooned the pesto-coated rigatoni into my big white pasta bowls. "Someone needs to help me eat all this food. Anyway, it's not you that's keeping her away. It's me. She avoids me all she can." I didn't want Ian to leave. There was comfort in his company. He'd been Sam's law partner and close friend for more than fifteen years and I wanted to be with someone who'd known my husband well and had loved him. Ian had been my rock since Sam's death, handling everything from the cremation to the living trust to managing our investments. How did people survive a devastating loss without an Ian in their lives?

Ian set the bowls of pasta on the kitchen table, then poured himself a glass of wine. "I think she worries I'm trying to take Sam's place," he said. He ran a hand over his thinning blond hair. He was one of those men who would look good bald, but I knew he wasn't happy about that prospect.

"Oh, I don't think so," I said, but I remembered Grace mentioning that he might as well move in. Should I have asked her why she said that? Not that she would have answered me.

I sat down across the table from Ian and slipped the tines of my fork into a tube of rigatoni I didn't really feel like eating. I'd lost twenty pounds since Sam died. "I miss my little Gracie." I bit my lip, looking into Ian's dark eyes behind his glasses. "When she was younger, she'd follow me everywhere around the house. She'd

crawl into my lap to cuddle and I'd sing to her and read to her and…" I shrugged. I'd known how to be a good mother to that little girl, but she was long gone.

"I imagine everyone feels that way when their kids become teenagers," Ian said. He had no kids of his own. Forty-five and he'd never even been married, which would be suspect in another man but we'd all just accepted it in Ian. He'd come close long ago—with Noelle—and I didn't think he'd ever quite recovered from the sudden ending of that relationship.

"Sam would have known what to say to her." I heard the frustration in my voice. "I love her so much, but she was Sam's daughter. He was our…our translator. Our intermediary." It was true. Sam and Grace had been two quiet souls with no need to speak to each other to communicate. "You could feel the connection between them when you'd walk into a room where they were sitting, even if one of them was on the computer and the other reading. You could *feel* it."

"You're such a perfectionist, Tara," Ian said. "You have this expectation of yourself that you can be a perfect parent, but there's no such thing."

"You know what they loved to do?" I smiled to myself, stuck in my memory, which was where I was spending a lot of my time lately. "Sometimes I'd have a late meeting and I'd come home and find them sitting in the family room, watching a movie together, drinking some coffee concoction they'd invented."

"Sam and his coffee." Ian laughed. "All day long. He had a cast-iron gut."

"He turned Grace into a caffeine addict by the time she was fourteen." I nibbled a piece of pasta. "She misses him like crazy."

"Me, too," Ian said. He poked at his rigatoni.

"And then to have Cleve break up with her so soon after." I shook my head. My baby girl was hurting. "I wish she were a little more like me," I said, and then realized that was unfair. "Or that I was a little more like her. I just wish we had something more in common. Some activity we could share, but we're so different. Everyone at school talks about it. The other teachers, I mean. I think they expected her to be into theater, like me."

"I think there's a law there can only be one drama queen in a family," Ian said, and I kicked him beneath the table.

"I'm not a drama queen," I said. "But I've always thought the theater could be so good for her, don't you think? It would get her out of her shell."

"She's just quiet. It's not a crime to be an introvert."

Not a crime, no, but as someone whose need to be with other people bordered on the pathological, I had trouble understanding my daughter's shyness. Grace loathed any social event that involved more than one or two people, while, as my father used to say, "Tara can talk the ears off a stalk of corn."

"Has she mentioned getting her driver's license yet?"

I shook my head. Grace was afraid of driving since Sam died. Even when I drove her someplace, I could feel

her tension in the car. "I suggested it a couple of times, but she doesn't want to talk about it," I said. "She would have talked to Sam, though." I slipped my fork into another piece of pasta. Sitting there with Ian, I was suddenly slammed by the reality that could catch me unawares at any moment—in the middle of my classroom, while casting the junior play, while doing the laundry: Sam was never coming back. He and I would never make love again. I'd never again be able to talk to him in bed at night. I'd never again feel his arms around me when I woke up in the morning. He'd not only been my husband but my dearest and oldest friend, and how many women could say that about the man they married?

We were loading the dishwasher when my phone rang, the electronic tones of "All That Jazz" filling the kitchen. I dried my hands and glanced at the caller ID. "It's Emerson," I said to Ian. "Do you mind if I take it?"

"Of course not." Ian was even more addicted to his BlackBerry than I was. He had no room to complain.

"Hey, Em," I said into the phone. "What's up?"

"Have you spoken to Noelle?" Emerson asked. It sounded like she was in her car.

"Are you driving? Do you have your headset on?" I pictured her holding her cell phone to her ear, her long curly brown hair spilling over her hand. "Otherwise, I'm not talking to—"

"Yes, I have it on. Don't worry."

"Good." I'd become uberconscientious about using a cell phone in the car since Sam's accident.

"So have you spoken to her in the past couple of days?" Emerson asked.

"Um…" I thought back. "Three days ago, maybe? Why?"

"I'm on my way over there. I haven't been able to reach her. Do you remember her talking about going away or anything?"

I tried to remember my last conversation with Noelle. We'd talked about the big birthday bash she, Emerson and I were planning for Suzanne Johnson, one of the volunteers for Noelle's babies program…and Cleve's mother. The party had been Noelle's idea, but I was overjoyed to have something to keep me busy. "I don't remember her saying anything about a trip," I said.

Ian glanced at me. I was sure he knew who we were talking about.

"Not in a long time," Emerson said.

"You sound worried."

Ian touched my arm, mouthed, "Noelle?" and I nodded.

"I thought she was coming over last night," Emerson said, "but she didn't show. I must have—Hey!" She interrupted herself. "Son of a bitch! Sorry. The car in front of me just stopped for no reason whatsoever."

"Please be careful," I said. "Let's get off."

"No, no. It's fine." I heard her let out her breath. "Anyway, we must have gotten our wires crossed, but now I can't reach her so I thought I'd stop in on my way home from *Hot!*" *Hot!* was the new cafe Emerson had recently opened down by the waterfront.

"She's probably out collecting baby donations."

"Probably."

Users Review

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