

Just Between Us

By Deborah Bedford

Chapter One

February 17

Dear Diary,

I know you are wondering why I ripped out all the January pages and all the rest of February and just started on today I did it because I filled January up with dumb stuff Little girl stuff And now I'm not a little girl anymore.

I ripped everything out so I can just open this book and start allover on this day

This is going to be a very important book. I am going to write my thoughts and feelings in here so when I get old and I have a daughter who is fourteen, I can remember about some of the things I was thinking and feeling. I really think I'll remember everything. But I decided to write it down in case I don't Because I wonder if my mind might change when I get old. Like when I get to be thirty

The first thing I have to write about is being a teenager: When I grow up I am always going to love my daughter: I won't care if she talks back or if she says the wrong thing or if she isn't very pretty or if she wears too much purple eyeshadow or even if she screams at me. I don't mean to scream at Dad. But sometimes it seems like everything aches inside me all at once and I don't know why. I need him to be my friend and he's too busy worrying about the trains and I just want to die.

That's when I scream. I want him to grab me and shake me and make me stop. And then I want him to hug me and tell me he's going to make me feel better inside. But Dad never will. He just stands there looking at me like I'm a real goof, and his arms just dangle there. He just stands there and looks at me like everything is wrong with me. And maybe it is.

I'm not going to do that when I have a kid. A baby.

Diary, maybe you are thinking, why is she writing all this stuff and talking about her own kid? I'll tell you why. This is kind of hard to write. I'll probably look at this page next week and laugh. (I hope I can laugh.) Anyway, here it comes.

I am going to have a baby.

Me. Ann. I think.

I skipped school today and walked over to that Planned Parenthood place. And I'm supposed to call them back later and they'll tell me. But I'm already pretty sure. And I'm scared, I think.

I thought to have a baby you had to do it all the time like you do when you're married or when you're in the movies. I asked Pam, a girl at school I hang around with, what she knew about it and she said that it's common knowledge to everybody that it could happen any time. But nobody told me that.

My dad is going to die, I mean not funny die or even mad die. I think this is going to hurt him so much he will die. But no matter what he does, I am going to get a lit tie baby that belongs to me. And that will be okay, I think. I hope the baby will love me.

I'd better go,

Love,

Ann Leidy Small

(Age 14)

The pretty dark-haired teenager lay down her pen and stared out the window of the tiny town house she shared with her father. It was snowing outside again, great, huge flakes that covered everything like sugar frosting. *I've got to call that place and really find out*, she prodded herself. But she didn't want to call yet, didn't want to know for sure that everything was changing. She wanted to sit on her bed and pretend everything was going to stay the same. But, she reminded herself, *I don't really want anything to stay the same, either.*

Ann stuffed her diary beneath a pillow and then flopped across the unmade bed to reach for her purse. She rummaged around in it until she found the business card. A nurse had written the number she needed on it. She carried it into the kitchen, where the phone was, and dialed. And the nurse at the other end gave her the answer she was half hoping, half dreading to hear.

"Your test came back positive, Ann. You *are* pregnant. If you need anything, counseling or advice, please come..." But Ann didn't hear the rest of it. The words hummed in her ears, but never made it to her brain.

She had to tell her father.

He's not gonna understand. He never understands anything anymore.

She was scared, but she had no other choice-she had to tell him. She went into the den and curled her legs under her on the ancient olive-green sofa. It would be a long wait; he was never home from work before nine anymore. But if she made herself sit here, made herself not move until her legs ached, she knew she could make herself brave enough.

Sure enough, it was hours before he came home, looking tired and angry. She could tell when he came in the door that he had had a horrible day.

"What are you doing up? Isn't your homework done yet?" She shook her head at him. She had never even thought to finish it.

"What's going on then?"

"I need to talk to you, Daddy."

The little-girl word she so seldom used with him anymore tugged on his heart. And it made him realize more than ever how grown up she had become. He couldn't believe it was little Annie sitting there. Where had the kid he had known so well gone? She had turned into a woman who was a stranger to him.

It had seemed like only months before but, really, it had been years since he had yanked her dark curls to tease her when he came home from his brakeman's job on the train. He had worked for Union Pacific then, and every time he walked in the door, he'd teased her and told her she was ornery before he squeezed her to him.

"I'm not ornery. I'm *Ann*." She'd danced around him as if he hadn't even looked at her yet, flailing her arms against his knees as he tried to hug her momma. "Did the train go fast? Did you get the coal to California? Did you bring me anything?"

He always whipped a pack of gum out of his pocket and stuck it behind her ear. "I love you, Pip-squeak. Here's your present. Go away for a minute so your mother and I can smooch."

Now she stood before him and he didn't even know who she was. He and his daughter had stopped telling each other "I love you" a long time ago. He couldn't remember when or why-it had been a slow process, eroding over days, months, even years. He looked at her now and saw a girl he didn't know, a dainty, emotional beauty whose developing, compact body shouted a beware signal to him every time he thought about hugging her or teasing her or telling her he still cared.

"I need to tell you something." She was clutching a sofa pillow with both hands, holding it in front as if it was a shield. "It isn't an easy thing to say. And you aren't going to like it."

There was something about her expression that made Richard feel as if he had deserted her and, really, there were times he knew that he had. He didn't even know what to say to Ann anymore. It made him ache just to look at her. He diverted his eyes from her and searched for the day's *Rocky Mountain News* He couldn't remember where he had dropped it.

"You have to look at me. This is important."

He found the newspaper beside the TV set. And then he made himself meet her eyes again. It was the first time he realized how scared she was. "Maybe you'd better go ahead, Ann."

"I had this *test* today."

He had no idea where she was coming from. "Did you do good on it or did you flunk it or what?"

"No." She reddened. "Not that kind of test. Not the kind you flunk. The nurse gave it to me. At a clinic."

"Out with it then. Stop fooling. What sort of test?" Ann couldn't look at him when she said the words. She didn't want to see the anger or the pain or even worse, the indifference in his eyes. She focused on the gray, scuffed toes of her sneakers. "It was a pregnancy test." A little louder. "It came back positive." She couldn't make herself sound quite as penitent as she thought she should sound for him. She had been so lonely for so long. Maybe this would make it better. She touched her stomach. "A baby, Dad."

He stared at the top of her head. The head with the curls he used to tousle. She wouldn't raise it.

He felt as if the stranger standing before him had dealt the daughter he loved one final, fatal blow. Despite their differences, he had wanted her to have everything. "Ann. No. *You can't be.*"

"But I am."

"But you're too young-" his voice sounded unfamiliar even in his own ears, staccato, grinding in his throat like gravel "-too young and too smart for this." "No." Her voice was louder now.

"No on both counts."

He wanted to shake her but he didn't; he hadn't touched her in years. "Oh, Ann, didn't you know? Couldn't you see...?"

But she was shaking her head. And now she was crying. "No, Daddy. I really didn't know."

She had called him daddy again. The word itself and the knowledge of what she had done twisted inside of him and then, like a fist, hauled off and flattened his guts. He wanted to rip into something. A boy had touched her. Seen her. *Used* her. "Who did this to you?" He would kill the kid.

"Don't you know?"

Her question threw him off guard. He had been home so seldom with her that he really didn't know. But then he remembered one boy from the high school. Ann had talked about him some, and since she had met him, she'd seemed happier. Richard couldn't remember his name. "I don't..."

"Danny Lovell." It was the first time he had seen her smile since he walked in the front door.

"How could you let him do this to you?" The pain in his guts was turning to fury.

"I love him. That's the only reason...I..."

For one horrible moment, Richard wanted to thrash out at her, to wound her the way she was wounding him. "You don't love that boy. You're only fourteen years old! You don't know anything about love!"

"I do so!" She was shrieking at him. "Danny's taught me everything about it."

"He's a kid. He can't know anything about it."

"He cares about me. And he's sixteen. And he wants to be with me. He makes me feel special."

"He's *using* you," he shouted at her.

"Well, at least he's *around*," she shouted back, and, when she did, he realized everything she was accusing him of. "At least he's here. Not like you Not like you who doesn't even care. I don't know why you're acting so mad. You don't even want me!"

Oh, man. I didn't know I didn't know it was doing this to her.

"You just stay at the station all day and all night long worrying about your stupid trains. That's all that matters to you and I know it."

He had come here to Denver for her sake. After her mother died, he had wanted the two of them to live a civilized life without him racing after the freight trains and the big money. He had saved just enough out of that long-ago freight-train money to give her a start in college. But now, he reminded himself furiously, it didn't matter. She had blown it in a big way.

"You can't say that," he growled at her. "I am a father and my duty is to work hard and bring home money so we can eat." For the past five years, he had been a mother to her as well, and he supposed he hadn't been a good one. But, try as he might, he couldn't do everything.

Ann's words came back to him then. *No, Daddy. I really didn't know.* The words tormented him as they echoed over and over again inside his head.

This is my fault, he thought. And it has been all along. I was so afraid to reach out to her... so afraid to tell her what it means to grow up. Perhaps Ann's right to blame me. He struggled to shore up his emotions. And his voice, when it came, was certain and strong. "What would your mother do if she was here?"

"I don't know," Ann said.

"I thank God she isn't. I thank God she can't see what you've done," *And what we've done to each other.*

"Maybe. "if she was...." Ann trailed off. But Richard finished her sentence in his mind. *Maybe it wouldn't have happened. Carolyn would have helped Ann.* Or

me. But Carolyn was gone and he was alone now, always alone, except for his daughter.

Ann was standing close to him, and for a moment he felt a strange beckoning, as if her thoughts were so penetrating they were reaching out to him. He imagined she wanted him to be her daddy again, to cuddle her, to tell her everything was going to be okay. But he couldn't do that, couldn't tell her because, now, things wouldn't be.

He faced her. "Are you going to have the baby?"

She flinched. "Yes,"

"Will you keep it?" "Yes."

"There are other things you can do, you know, Adoption. There are couples all over the country searching for an available baby. You can see them on the Internet." She had been his baby girl once. So tiny and innocent and beautiful. He remembered the first time he had ever seen her, lying in Carolyn's arms, wrapped in everything pink they could find, She'd been bald as a balloon, with eyes open, alert, surveying him.

"I want to keep it,"

He couldn't soften toward her now. "I'm not supporting another kid, Ann. I've already paid my dues,"

She sighed, "I know that. I wouldn't ask it of you." It was what she had expected him to say. But still his words made her cringe. *He wasn't happy taking care of me. He was biding his time, paying his dues And that doesn't have anything to do with loving me.*

"If you stick with this decision, you've got to find a job. You won't have time for school. And you won't have any time with the baby, either, because you'll be working so hard." *Like me. Like what I did with you.*

"You don't think I can take care of it? You don't think I'm even good enough for that?"

He knew he had to tell her what he was feeling. He knew she deserved his honesty. He wasn't trying to be cruel. "I used to think *I* was good enough for that. But I wasn't. Bringing up a kid by yourself will be the hardest thing you've ever done, Ann. Maybe the hardest thing you'll ever do."

He didn't want her to be idealistic about a baby. And this time when he spoke to her, it was the first tender thing he'd said to her all evening. "Ann. A real baby isn't like a doll. You can't put it up on a shelf when you are tired of it or when you are finished playing."

"I know that," she said.

Maybe in her mind she knew it, but in her heart she didn't. He could read it in her eyes. "Babies never sleep and they eat every two hours and the diapers cost ten bucks for a bag that lasts only a few days."

Ann looked shattered. "Was I that horrible?"

No. You weren't horrible. But Carolyn wasn't fourteen when she had you. "You were a big job, Ann." The moment he said it, he knew it was the wrong thing. He was alienating her again. It happened every time he forgot how careful he had to be and started being honest with her instead.

She looked as if he had just punched her. "I hate you," she whispered. "I hate you."

"Fine," he said, giving up, knowing he was defeated. "It's a free country. Hate me." Ann exhausted him. Carolyn's death exhausted him. His job exhausted him. "Feel whatever you want to feel about me." He was grieving for her now. He knew he had lost her. And his next words wrenched out of him, tearing loose a part of him as they did so. But they were words he knew he had to say. "I haven't been a good father to you, Ann. And I won't be a good grandfather to a baby. You mustn't count on me for anything."

"I won't," she said bitterly. "I never have."

He turned and walked away from his daughter. Her last words were a final knife plunge into his heart. He was beaten. He stalked into his bedroom, the pain he felt making his movements disjointed and awkward. *Oh, Carolyn, I can't go through this alone.* He could hear Ann sobbing as he shoved the bedroom door shut and kicked a pile of dirty clothes out of his way. *How could she do this? How could I have let her do this?*

Richard surveyed his reflection in the mirror. Then he looked down at his hand and watched his own fingers ball into a huge fist. Without further ado he swung his arm back and, almost gleefully, using the power of his emotions, slammed his fist through the plasterboard wall.

Ann jumped at the sound of the wall shattering in the other room. "Oh, please," she wailed into her hands. "Oh, please...I don't know what...to do! Daddy, Daddy..." She sobbed heartbrokenly. *I knew he was going to be mad. Maybe I hoped he was going to be mad.* And, as she thought about Richard's reaction, she began to feel better.

Richard couldn't know it but his anger had been a victory of sorts to Ann. She had been almost afraid he wouldn't care. But maybe...if he cared enough to get that furious...maybe he still cared about her.

Ann buried her face in her hands again. It seemed as if she had been sitting here for hours but it was all over now. Or maybe it was just beginning. She wasn't certain. And this time she didn't cry, she only whispered it, as the clock beside her ticked away the minutes. "Maybe," she said softly, "maybe he'll stay at home more...." And then she was sobbing again, great racking cries that came

from somewhere deep within her. "Maybe...he'll start caring about me...more than he cares...about the *trains*...."

Monica Albright gave the miniature locomotive one more tweak with the tiny screwdriver before she held it up and studied it. She had acquired the turn-of-the-century steam engine for the antique toy museum. It was a lovely addition to the collection. But it would be even nicer if she could get the thing to run.

"Okay." She spoke as if the little train could hear her. "We're going to try this one more time." She carried it into the exhibit room and placed it on the track. "Here you go."

Carefully she took her hands off it and switched on the power. The model engine lurched forward. "Sylvia!" she hollered to her assistant. "It runs!" And then, for a while, she was lost, a child again as she coaxed the steam engine around a corner and across a bridge.

"Monica, don't forget your appointment." Sylvia entered the exhibit room and pointed at her watch. "It'll take you at least forty minutes to get down to Denver. And the traffic might be bad this time of day."

"Okay. I'll go." She glanced distractedly back at the train display. She couldn't believe she'd been fiddling with it for almost half an hour.

She gathered her things and hurried to her Cherokee. This appointment was an important one. She didn't want Joy Martin to think she wasn't punctual. Forty minutes later she turned the Jeep off of 1-25 onto Clarkson and parked in front of the square red-brick building.

Monica rushed to the third floor, pausing momentarily outside the door marked "Colorado Big-Brothers/Big Sisters Agency." She shifted her briefcase to the other hand, pulled the door open and entered.

"Hi." The receptionist greeted her immediately. "Are you Monica?"

"Yes."

"I'm Gwen." She extended a hand and Monica clasped it "Joy will be with you in a minute. I'll let her know you're here."

When Gwen left the room, Monica took the chance to look around the office. It was basic and drab, typical of a nonprofit service agency. The carpet was threadbare and she guessed the couch along the far wall had been donated years ago. But the pictures, plaques and letters scattered around the room attested to happy Little Sisters.

Monica gave a small smile of pleasure. For a long time now, Monica had been praying, asking the Father to show her a place where her faith could make a difference to someone else. In her busy life, she felt like she didn't have much chance to touch others with love. Her pastor had mentioned Big Brothers and Big

Sisters in a sermon last month, and she had researched the organization on the Internet. Standing at this desk now, it felt like the perfect fit.

She thumbed through the brochures lying on the table. *Making Life Choices. How to be a Friend. Boys in Love.* Her smile broadened. Important topics, all of them.

"Joy's ready for you." Gwen led Monica up a long, narrow hallway. "Right in here."

"Thank you." Monica turned her attention to the woman waiting behind the desk. "Joy. Hello." "Are you ready for this?"

"Very." Monica was still grinning. "And very excited"

Joy stood from her chair. "It is an exciting day. So many Big Sisters look back to the day they were matched with their Littles and see it as a real milestone." She pulled a manila folder from the pile on her desk and flipped it open. "Before I tell you about your match, I want to go over your file with you just to be certain I'm current." She pulled her chair closer and sat down.

"Fine." Monica crossed her ankles and leaned forward in one refined, fluid motion.

"Correct me if I've got anything wrong here. You are single. Thirty-two years of age. Willing to serve as a Big Sister because you have lots of positive energy to share."

"Yes." *And You Father*, she thought. *I want co share Your love.*

"You are curator of the antique toy museum at Hiwan Homestead in Evergreen."

"Yes."

"An interesting job. How did you get started?"

"I used to play with an old train collection of my father's." She hesitated and then realized Joy was waiting for more. "My sister always played with dolls. I was always more interested in Dad's trains. He taught me about his own collection. And when the Jefferson County Historical Society needed someone to put together an antique train display for Hiwan Homestead, I offered my services. And my father offered his trains."

"It began as a single exhibit?"

"Toy trains started coming in from everywhere. And then other toys, too. Wooden wagons. Kewpee dolls. Wrought iron fire trucks. It grew into quite an assortment. And, finally, the historical society voted to give the exhibit its own space and make it a permanent thing."

"I like that," Joy said. "You take a small idea and turn it into something much larger."

Monica nodded, still smiling. "That's a particular character trait of mine." One she was proud of sometimes but one that often gave her trouble.

Joy paused over an item in the file. "I had forgotten you were adopted."

"I am."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I'm human. I've questioned it at times" Monica did her best to answer Joy candidly. "I did search out my biological mother several years ago. But my true parents are the ones who raised me." She stopped when she saw the worried look on Joy Martin's face. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"Only if you perceive it as one. We wanted to match you with a pregnant teenager."

"Is she going to put the baby up for adoption?"

"At this point, we don't know," Joy told her. "She wants to keep the baby. But she's very young, very insecure...."

"I can't see her decision affecting me one way or the other," Monica answered truthfully.

"You might have to help her make it."

"I could do that."

Joy thumbed through another stack of portfolios and selected one. The caseworker slid a school photograph across the desk toward her. "Here she is. Ann Small. She's fourteen, a ninth-grader in middle school."

"And she's pregnant?" Monica was astonished.

"She's having a tough time."

"Is she staying in school?" Monica asked.

"Not unless someone close to her starts giving her some support."

Monica held the photo between two finely manicured hands, framing it with her thumbs. Even in the picture, Ann Small looked sad. Her eyes were huge, round and melancholy. Monica felt her heart go out to the girl. "She's a pretty young lady. But she doesn't look happy."

"Ann isn't happy. She has a very low self-esteem," Joy explained. "Her school counselor referred her to us just last week. The counselor approached her because the girl was despondent, not because she knew about the pregnancy."

"The counselor? What about her parents?"

"Her mother is deceased. She died five years ago in Wyoming. You will meet Richard Small when we go to meet Ann. I have to warn you, Monica, that the father did not instigate any of this. From our interviews with Ann, it sounds as if their relationship is abysmal."

"What does she say?"

"She's a very lonely child and we believe her problems stem from her relationship with her father. He works long hours. She isn't just another latchkey kid. He leaves in the morning before she wakes up and usually isn't home until she's in bed. And sometimes it's seven days a week."

"Poor kid."

"She needs a lot of companionship and love, Monica."

"It's love I'm prepared to give." She studied the photograph again.

"So the situation sounds...acceptable to you?"

Monica didn't answer for a moment. She wasn't questioning her own decision to become a Big Sister. She was mesmerized by the sadness on Ann Small's face. A scripture from Genesis was running through her head. "This is how you can show your love to me—Everywhere we go, say of me 'He is my brother.'"