

*Confessions of a Crispy Mom*

A Novel

Laura Frances



Lost Sock Publishing

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Lost Sock Publishing  
Laurinburg, North Carolina 28352

First published in the United States of America by Lost Sock Publishing

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Cover design by Dineen Miller

ISBN-13: 978-1534963238  
ISBN-10: 1534963235

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For Saige, Knox, and Cullen

My dreams come true



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*Crispy:* \ 'kris-pē\ \_

Definition: Firm but easily broken or crumbled. Tender and brittle. Something that quickly loses the 'taut' equilibrium of its material.

Synonyms: Beat, bleary, bone-weary, bushed, dead tired, done for, drained, had it, limp, outta gas, played out, sapped, shot, spent, weak, wearied, worn out.

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## Prologue

Joanna Fripp. The mere thought of that woman's name could cause the hairs on the back of my neck to rise and my hands to knot into fists. A thorn in my flesh from the first day I met her, she became more like a jagged log in my side when she moved across the street. Being around her could change me into someone I didn't know. Someone I didn't like. But it was the neighborhood get-together about six months ago—the one I couldn't avoid—that made me wonder if maybe I was the one who had a problem.

That was before the letters, of course. Before I knew the truth about Mama. Before my entire life—my very identity—shifted as if the world had tilted one degree off normal.

It was the first pool party of the year. The one meant to celebrate the kids' first weekend out of school. But there was something about the smell of coconut sunscreen and hot dogs on a grill that had a way of drawing the entire neighborhood. Matt was working, again, but promised to be home in time and actually made good on that. Hours before, I'd returned from a three day workshop in which I'd given two keynotes, and taught classes. Exhaustion would've been an improvement over the way I felt.

The kids were beyond their normal rambunctiousness. I didn't blame them; the pool opening meant reconnecting with all the friends we'd missed during the winter months. For the moms, it was a time to look forward to settling in by the pool in the warm evenings, chatting



it up while our kids played nearby. I'd actually get to enjoy a conversation with someone over the age of twelve. Bliss.

While the kids took turns daring each other to jump into the freezing water without screaming, the moms placed their covered dish offerings on a long wooden picnic table and gathered together in a row of plastic sun chairs. The slatted wood fence formed a familiar and soothing border around us—our summer hideout.

The sun was high in the sky but it was too chilly to be in a bathing suit, though nothing could've stopped the kids. Still, it seemed a good enough excuse for the women to show up amply covered and putting off the yearly bathing suit exposure for another few weeks. Except, of course, for Fripp.

A few hours into the festivities, the moms filled paper plates, wrapped their children in terry beach towels and sat them together at picnic tables. Then, mid-party, we turned around to find our husbands rushing to Fripp's aid. Buried under an assortment of plastic inflatables and noodles, you couldn't catch a glimpse of what she was wearing until every man in the perimeter removed an item from her hands. I swear, I think she brought an exact number for that very purpose.

When her curvaceous body was finally exposed, sweet, unattached Dixie, with nothing to lose, gasped and stepped away laughing. The other mom's faces, however, burned at the sight of Fripp in a zebra striped, string bikini and heels. Heels. At a kid's pool party, ya'll. A flurry of women tried to be as inconspicuous as possible as they rushed to gather their husbands. Most went willingly, and quite frankly may not have realized what was going on. Matt, however, continued to help her along, carrying her Pucci beach bag to a chaise directly across from where we were sitting on the other side of the pool.

And though the pool was stocked with a bevy of rescue flotation devices, emergency kits, and even a fire extinguisher, for the first time I realized it was lacking in sharp objects. But, I'm a creative woman. It's been six months, and I still shudder at what I did next.

## One

### *Confession #1: This is everything I wanted?*

Sitting in the carpool line at West Elm Elementary, I was doing all I could to keep from nodding off. The last few days had been a blur of trying to take care of Bryson, who apparently caught the crud, and managing everything else on my platter—plates were for lightweights.

My rumpled Target shirt and day-old pants were witness to the fact I'd been up all night. His tiny body lay on the back seat, spanning across the tan leather, in the stretched Spiderman pajamas he'd clearly outgrown six months before. His plump little belly poked out, making me smile, followed by the guilty cringe of realizing a decent mother would buy her children pajamas that fit.

The floor was littered with small bits of trash from things I couldn't recognize, accentuated by the lingering scent of old french fries that had established its territory no matter how hard I tried to remove it. Bryson moaned in his sleep and I turned to stare at my nursing-back-to-health-nemesis, a large red bucket sitting on the floor beside his head. I let out a sigh hoping the line would move and he wouldn't need to use it—again.

Fripp had beaten me to the first spot in line. I began to wonder if she'd installed some sort of tracking device on my vehicle to let her know the precise moment I pulled out of the driveway each afternoon.

Seriously. If I showed up five minutes early, Fripp arrived six. I'm telling you right now, it got on my very last nerve. Especially on days like this when they were thin and exposed to begin with.

A sparkle caught my eye as I watched Fripp casually drop her arm out the window. I mean, really. The temperature was in the twenties for goodness sake. Shaded areas of lawns still held onto snow from the storm the weekend before. She had to be freezing.

From one car length behind, I caught myself staring at the ring, wondering at the stone's true size and imagining Fripp's husband buying it from the Home Shopping Network and passing it off as real. I couldn't help but smile. When I snapped out of it, I realized Fripp was watching me in her rear-view mirror. Busted.

Upon making eye contact, Fripp flung open her door and rushed out of her Mercedes SUV toward my deluxe blue minivan—the bane of my existence as a stylish woman. I cracked the window half an inch.

“Well, hey there, Delia,” she sang in her sweet drawl, one she'd tried to assume since junior high though she was a Yankee by birth and never quite adapted it. Adjusting her freshly styled hair with her left ring finger, she stopped when I didn't continue rolling the window down. Her head tilted to the side, much like a confused puppy.

A plan formed quickly in my mind. “Hey, Fripp,” I whispered. “Bryson's sick in the back seat. Caught something really nasty, I'm afraid. I'd love to talk with you, but trust me, you do not want this. I'm pretty sure he threw up a piece of his liver this morning.” I coughed once for good measure.

Fripp's hand flew to her mouth. Not at the thought of poor Bryson, I was sure, but more likely her own need of self-preservation. “Ok, then,” she mumbled through her hand as she backed away from the van. Then, apparently realizing she'd used the unbedazzled hand, she switched them. “Um, good luck with that.”

I made the most convincing look of concern I could muster, and nodded to show as much disappointment as I could manage. I watched as Fripp reentered her car and seemed frantic as she searched for something. What appeared to be a fifty-gallon jug of hand sanitizer,

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was hauled from the backseat, squirted, and rubbed on her hands. Cooties rocked.

Since she hadn't been able to show her new wares up close and personal, she exposed her arm once more out the window, moving her hand ever-so-slightly so prisms danced off of her ring finger from the largest rock this side of Graceland. A three-and-a-half carat diamond, I was told. Fripp's "push present" from her last baby, though he was nearly six now.

Of course rumors flew about why her husband was making such an extravagant gesture this late in the game, but from what Fripp was telling everyone, it had taken nearly that long to wait their turn for the designer to make it. After all, she'd told Dixie, he's in Beverly Hills and has a client list to die for. Bryson moaned once more in the back seat, and I turned to check on what was likely the last of my babies. I thought of my own push present: a two-day headache from an overzealous epidural.

Something sticky wiped across my face as I turned around, and I checked the mirror to find a smear of purple Tylenol across my collar. How could I spend my life managing my complicated speaking schedule at venues all over the country, yet not be able to remember the flavor of medicine my own children preferred?

A perky new kindergarten mom in an adorable white coat with faux fur trim waved at me as she passed between mine and Fripp's cars. I missed having energy. And clean clothes. I wiped at the stain on my collar, and ran my fingers through my hair thinking myself lucky that more purple goo hadn't ended up there—oh wait. There it was. I tucked the sticky strands behind my ear realizing brown hair had its advantages.

As I turned ahead, I caught Fripp adjusting her rearview mirror to apply another coat of lipstick. Really? In the pick-up line?

A bell clanging from the school building summoned children from the classrooms. They filed out of the old brick building in a ragged single line formation. Book bags, fleece scarves, and school projects filled tiny arms as random loose-leaf papers fluttered to the concrete

walkway unnoticed. Teachers followed behind, glancing side to side in search of stragglers. I rolled my passenger side window down a few inches, enjoying the energy and fresh air as they moved my way.

Remi and Mason searched the end of the pick-up line, assuming I'd be late again. They hadn't yet clued in to my new obsession as the early bird. "Hey guys!" I waved. When Mason spotted me, he sprinted forward only to be caught by the string of his monkey toboggan by Mrs. Wheeler, the third grade substitute known for taking her position a bit too seriously.

"Mason McColl, back of the line, this instant! I said no running, and I mean it!" She followed Mason's pointing finger and met my weary eyes. I smiled a weak smile and nodded. She peered upward, let out a sigh, and pulled him to the front line instead. Mason's brown eyes sparkled, victorious.

Remi—the defender of world sibling justice—watched the scene with disdain. As Mason giggled and misbehaved with the child behind him in line, Remi's mouth dropped and she threw her hands up at me, as if I had something to do with him not being properly reprimanded. I noticed a hole in the underarm of her new fleece coat and watched as she quickly lowered her arms, glancing toward another group of girls to see if they noticed as well.

Behind them, sweet little Meredith Clayton stood by herself, watching her own shoe as she made a tiny circular path in the grass. She'd just lost her mother three months before and I wanted so desperately to help her. I'd tried, of course, but her father wouldn't have it. I understood that too. Being without a mother was hard even at my age. My throat caught as a memory of Mama tried to come to mind, but I pushed it down. I had the kids to focus on now, they were enough.

When all grades lined in their places, another metal door opened from the side building. A row of tiny Pre-K kids stepped out in a rambling line, holding hands. Most were so overdressed for the cold; they could barely manage to hang on through puffy mittens, much less lower the arms of their winter coats. My heart ached, remembering my

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kids at that sweet age. They weren't too old for another sibling. In fact, I'd always pictured us a family of six, not five. It seemed as if someone was missing. But, I wasn't about to replay that conversation with Matt again. Not now. I couldn't stand another fight.

"Jade and Jackson Fripp . . . Remi and Mason Gray . . . Amy and Carleigh Wright . . ."

Five students stood on three large painted rectangles, as the first three cars pulled ahead for pick-up. The kids knew the routine. This place remained so . . . organized . . . I could barely wrangle three kids in and out of a grocery store. How on earth could they manage hundreds?

I hit the button for the side door, which slid open, then closed, then open again—psychotic van. Attached to the dash by Velcro, the after-school list served as a constant reminder for my scattered thoughts. A typical Thursday, we had karate, and basketball practice. I needed to stop by the grocery store: milk, juice, peanut butter, toothpaste. A small spurt of time existed between basketball and karate, but I couldn't forget to stop and pick up Remi's shorts for this weekend's tournament. Or, to get Matt's dry cleaning. Or, to call the groomer about boarding Amos for Matt's party.

A bell dinged on my dash—a little gas pump lit in orange. Maybe I could get to Billy's before they closed. The last place on earth that still pumped gas and washed your windshield for you.

Remi plopped onto the front seat, filling the floor with seventh grade books, gym shoes, and various scraps of paper. She unloaded her coat, pushed off her boots, and pulled on new socks and basketball shoes. The smell of sweaty socks filled the car and I cringed as she wadded them and placed them next to my can of diet cola. Mason climbed into the back, talking non-stop about dinosaurs and a book they'd read in the library. I wondered if he cared if anyone listened. Up ahead, the traffic guard motioned for Fripp to move forward and a three-car-line of overpriced vehicles pulled ahead at once toward the nicest part of town.

"So, how was school, guys?" I always started home this way.

Remi stared ahead, her eyes filling with tears. She turned toward the window, gathering her dark hair into a rubber band she'd unwrapped from her wrist.

"What's wrong, sweetie? Did something happen with Jade again?" And most days pretty much went like this.

"I hate her, Mama."

"No, you don't hate her, hon. We don't use that word. Try to find a better one."

"Ok, fine. I despise her. I loathe her. I regret her existence. Is that better?" Remi kicked her book bag and crossed her arms.

"Actually, impressive. Can I borrow that last one?" I turned to her and winked, as I placed my hand on her arm and squeezed.

Remi cracked a smile. She turned to face me and leaned her head against the seat. "She's mean, Mama. All she ever does is poke fun at me. Today, she pointed out to the entire class my boots are from Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart, Mama. It's like the kiss of death."

"Remi, just last month she spent the night. Now you hate her? Besides, what's wrong with Wal-Mart? Those are probably the exact same shoes they're paying ten times as much for. They'd be smart to shop there." I knew that wouldn't cut it.

Remi stared at me, her mouth creating a straight, tight line. "These were your idea. I wanted the fur lined boots."

"Ok. I know. It's not the same. But, we have a responsibility not to waste our money. I'm not going to buy you a \$150 pair of boots when there are perfectly good ones on your feet. Besides, those are from Target, not Wal-Mart."

That last point was wasted on Remi.

Pulling to a stop light, I realized Fripp sat in the turning lane to my left, with her daughter in the passenger seat. Jade smiled and waved at me as if she were actually polite. I smiled and waved back, but couldn't keep my eyes off her impeccable makeup, as if prepped for a photo shoot.

Remi leaned over to glimpse at who it was, and I caught the slightest change in Jade's eyes. Subtle, but effective, and I knew she

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meant it for Remi. They rolled into the intersection, readying to turn as we pulled forward and drove across. How could someone so young know how to play mind games? Fripp seemed to train her daughter to be exactly like her.

“Oh!” Mason shouted out from the back seat. “Did you, mom?” His wide grin made me realize I’d probably missed something. A promise made, maybe, and quickly forgotten. I searched my mind trying to remember. I thought of him watching the clock all day, counting the very minutes until he got into the car to ask for something I was too inept to remember.

“Did I . . . what, buddy?” I scanned his eyes quickly, turning to watch the road.

“Did you get it?” He clapped his hands twice and pulled his toboggan off, revealing a mess of brown tangles. It just made me love him.

I tried a playful tone. “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. I need a better description, mister.”

He smiled, wiggling his front tooth with his finger—a motion he’d been doing constantly since he realized it was actually moving.

The umbrella! “Dixie said we could pick it up whenever we wanted. We’ll head over there right now.”

“Yes!” Mason pumped his fist. The only kid in the third grade who hadn’t lost a single one, his first loose tooth was no small matter. My best friend, Dixie, tried to make him feel better by telling him the tooth fairy needed cornerstone teeth for her new pool house, and those were required to come from nine year olds. The craftiest person I knew, she promised him a mini-umbrella custom made for the tooth fairy’s pool side so Mason could put it under his pillow along with the tooth. I didn’t need to call her to make sure she’d remember. She never let anyone down.

We pulled into the business district of downtown, heading to her studio, when a man with a briefcase ran across the street while talking on his phone. He never noticed my van. I slammed on the brakes and took a hard right, trying to avoid careening into the antique light posts



LAURA FRANCES

recently decorated with garland and lights. From the back seat, a lurching sound carried through the car as Bryson threw his head into the bucket. Three young voices simultaneously screamed, “Mama!” while two of them scurried as far away from the back seat as they could get.

Just perfect. Another banner day.

## Two

*Confession #2: Even though I know I can't do it all, deep down, I still think I can.*

**T**wo weeks passed in a blur and Thanksgiving break was staring me head on. Motherhood didn't have to be this overwhelming. I was a mothering expert, for goodness sake. Maybe God was allowing this struggle in my life so I could help others through the same thing. I had to get a grip. And there was nothing like a list to help me stay on track.

I decided to plan my days two weeks ahead. That way, if a major blip occurred in my speaking engagements, I'd allowed time to recoup. Our schedule was difficult, I'll admit, trying to fit the kid's activities into the week and my travel and speaking in every other weekend. But, the key was organization. My family had never witnessed a Martha Stewart like the one who would soon overtake their disheveled home.

It was the first Saturday I'd had off in two months. My parenting seminars had taken off with the start of school, and it had been my busiest fall to date. But, as the holidays neared, I was thankful things were slowing down. This day was all mine. Well, mine and the kids since Matt was working—again. I inspected my freshly penned list and decided it was the perfect day to begin my Christmas shopping. I'd start with teacher's gifts.

Retailers managed to blend Halloween and Thanksgiving into one holiday, which shrunk in shelf space with each week nearer to Christmas. With Thanksgiving upon us, pink and lime green now covered every shelf and billboard, prepping for Christmas. With my list in one hand, and Bryson in the other, I braved the frontier no mother wants to go into with small children: the Target Superstore on Saturday.

I managed to avoid the Icee machine at the entrance café by distracting Remi and Mason with the stocking stuffers already loading the shelves in the mini aisles to the right of the door. Despite the lure of fresh popcorn popping nearby, we turned the corner in haste to pass the registers and toward the main aisles, I was home free.

Jingle Bells filled the air, and I stepped lighter somehow, more free. Not only were thoughts of a wonderful Christmas beginning to build, but it would be manageable this time. No frantic last minute rush of panic. Like every other Christmas to date.

There were seven teachers between my three kids. And each child wanted to make sure their gift was perfect. Knowing all seven would get more than their fill of hand soaps and lotions, I tried to think of something different and wanted the kids to do the same. I started with Bryson, knowing he would tire first, if not lose his focus completely once we came within twenty feet of the toy aisle.

“Ms. Jessie likes lettuce,” he said smiling. His brown eyes stared at me, sparkling with what I was sure was Christmas joy, and pleading I find the perfect gift made of . . . lettuce.

“Um, ok, buddy. I don’t know if I can wrap lettuce. Can you think of something else? Maybe something she and Ms. Lewis both like?”

He shook his head, his tiny lower lip sticking out as he frowned.

“Really? I’d bet they’d like one of these planters. Hey, check this out, it’s an amaryllis. Everyone likes flowers, right?” I walked toward a shelf display filled with silver pots and pointed to pictures of a budding plant.

“No, Mama. She only likes lettuce.” Bryson picked dried cereal off the front of his shirt.

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“That can’t be right. I’ll bet there are all kinds of goodies here for her.”

“What about that?!” Mason stood with eyes wide. I didn’t have to follow his gaze to know what he was considering.

“We’re not going down the toy aisle, Mason. Remember our talk in the car? We are not. Going. To buy toys. Got it?”

But I was too late. A big brother with a daring streak beats a mother’s warning every time. Before I could catch the blue tag hanging out of Bryson’s shirt, both boys were running full force, squealing at the sight of a cardboard banner labeled “Toyland.” Perfect.

“Remi, do you think you can pick out something for your teachers? There are tons of things on this aisle. I’ll go get the boys and be right back.”

“No you won’t.” She rolled her eyes and pulled out her cell phone.

“What? I will. Just give me a sec—” I considered the aisle I dreaded the most, then turned to her and sighed.

“Mama, you know they’re going to trick you into getting them something. They do it every time. I don’t know what to get my teachers. I need you to help me.” She glanced at her screen and finished what appeared to be a text. Of course, she was probably updating social media with what a disappointment her mother was.

“They don’t trick me.” I could feel a headache coming on as the tension in my neck mounted.

“Ok. Fine. Go. You always go.” Remi folded her arms and glared at me. I imagined her doing the same for the next week if I didn’t handle this well.

“Ok. Hold on—” Then, from the corner of my eye, I saw it. A shelf laden with the newest wares of Toyland leaned precariously to one side. A squeal from a small child—which sounded all too familiar—led to a scream from another. As if stuck knee deep in molasses, my legs struggled to push toward the scene fast enough as a tower of Transformers tilted toward the main aisle, and crashed. Small plastic boxes fell like droplets from a waterfall, cascading one over the other until the source was spilled completely.

I rushed to the aisle, grabbed the small blue shirt tag, and smacked the back jean pocket swiftly. Once. Screaming ensued—in a voice I didn't recognize. And I glanced to realize the child in my grasp was not my own. I scanned the area frantically, trying to make sense of it all.

Two aisles down, in the food section, Bryson and Mason stood holding a head of lettuce and peeking around the corner at the maniacal mother who smacked down random children at will.

The small boy pushed my hand off of his collar and kicked me karate-style in the knee. I buckled and fell, completing clearing a shelf of Barbies as I tried to grab something to hold onto. Within seconds, a large woman in pajama bottoms and a too-tiny tee shirt barreled toward me, being pulled by her son.

“Oh my gosh, I am so sorry. I thought he was mine—please—I'm just—I don't know what to say—”

She glowered at me with complete disgust, kicked a transformer in my direction, and carried her child off as if I was trying to take him from her. I pulled myself to stand, and leaned to pull my pants leg up and check my knee. A bruise was already forming. When I lifted my head again, a store manager who I swear was the same age as Remi, stood in front of me tapping his foot.

You've never seen a mama and her children move so fast. I gave no thought to the mess on the floor. Or an apology. Or, any other rational action that should have occurred. I just wanted out. That very minute. Out of all of it.

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No one spoke the entire trip home. Remi texted relentlessly, and I was sure the tween-text-tree would spread quickly enough that all of our neighbors would come out to finally witness what I'd always felt like: a failure. Who was I kidding? I was no expert. Just because I had the courage to stand and talk in front of people, it gave me credibility.

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But, in reality, I was hanging on by a wax thread. Slipping down as the heat rose.

“Remi, who are you talking to?” I didn’t care that it was none of my business.

“Jade.” She turned away from me, as if hiding a secret.

“Well, that’s perfect. Yesterday you hated her. Now today—you’re what—telling her your mother assaulted a small child? Perfect. I can’t wait to see Fripp standing on the sidewalk to point and gawk. Maybe she’s called DSS.”

“It’s not like that, Mama. Gah.” Remi paused. Her phone beeped, and she punched the keyboard again. She read the screen, then threw the device and cried.

“What in the world?” I reached over and took her hand, feeling like the mother-of-the-year once again.

“She . . . told.” Remi puffed the words out in broken gasps.

“Told what?” My mind raced. I could think of way too many things I didn’t want her to say.

“About . . . Alex.” She whispered the name, peering to the backseat to make sure her brothers hadn’t heard. They both stared at me, and stopped chewing something. I had given them nothing.

I tried to focus. “Alex Wilde? The boy who poured Coke in your hair last year?”

“Shh, Mama.” Remi glanced quickly behind her, then smiled a little as she raked her fingers through her wavy brown locks. “Yeah.”

“Do you, um, like him?”

“Mama!” She covered her face with her hands as it reddened beneath.

The boy’s taunt-radar tuned in and Mason sang “Remi and Alex, Remi and Alex,” before something green and slimy fell out of his mouth and he snapped it shut.

Lettuce.

“Sweetie, it’s ok. Whatever she told him can’t be that bad. Really.” Of course it could. I remembered twelve.

“She told him I’d been taking pictures of him on my cell phone and photoshopping myself in.”

I stared blankly. Kids were way too savvy these days. I searched my mind for the positive. “She probably likes him too, Remi. She’s trying to distract him so he’ll notice her instead. Classic jealousy.”

“Not she’s not, Mama. No one’s jealous of me. I mean, really.” She surveyed herself, and shook her head.

My heart ached for her. I pulled the car into the driveway as the boys unbuckled themselves, ready to rush out the second I parked. Remi texted once more as I turned toward her. “You are beautiful, sweetheart. More than you know.”

She glared at me as if it made her angry, then huffed and rolled her eyes.

Joy.

I reached above the visor and punched the button for the garage door. As it creaked upwards, the side door to the kitchen flung open and the lights were on. Matt was supposed to be catching up at work and his truck was still gone. A shadow rose across the garage wall and Remi screamed. Robbers? I slammed the car in reverse and sped down the driveway and through the neighborhood, toward Matt’s office. The boys rolled through the backseat, thinking this was fun.

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When Matt didn’t answer the office phone, I called Daddy—who didn’t answer his phone either, thank-you-very-much. I left both a frantic message. Tire’s squealed as I pulled into the newly painted parking lot at Matt’s company. It was empty, save for his truck. I wanted to rush in, but felt frozen in place. Remi spent the entire trip over yelling at her brothers that we were being robbed. They cowered in the back seat now, and all three kids were crying. I pulled out my cell and called Matt again. This time he answered on the first ring.

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“Matt! Someone’s broken into the house. We came home and they were still there! We were pulling into the garage and I think they saw us—and were coming out—so we rushed over here—call the police!”

“Delia, calm down. Let me just—”

“Calm down? Are you kidding me? Did you hear what I said, Matt? They’re in there! Right now! We’re sitting outside your office. All the kids are crying and—”

In a voice way too calm for my taste and obvious situation he said, “Ok, hon. I’m coming out.”

“Hurry! And . . . bring your gun.” All men had guns, right?

The line went dead.

He took his sweet time. I’m telling you, I was ready to smack him it took so long. He opened the front door to the office building, talking on his cell, smiling, and nodding his head as if he were enjoying a conversation with an old friend. No rush. No sense of urgency. Was he making light of this? Or, maybe he was calling the police. He did know everyone in town. I rolled the window down as he drew closer. Cool air rushed into the car and Remi moaned, pulling her sweater closer. I rolled it up and stepped out instead.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m so sorry. It’ll be fine. Just continue on with what you were doing. Ok, yes ma’am. Bye.”

“Ok, Matt. I think we should stay here until the police get there and get them. I don’t want the kids to witness anything upsetting. I drove like a crazy woman over here. I mean, just when you wish a cop would pull you for speeding, nothing . . .”

“No, it’s fine. We’re going home.”

“I’m not going home. What are you, crazy? I’m completely sure they were there, Matt. I saw them coming toward us as we ripped out of the driveway.”

“I know, hon. Listen. I know them. I . . . um . . . hired them.”

“You hired people to break in?” I was utterly stunned.

Matt laughed, which made me want to hurt him. “No,” he said still smiling. “It’s not a break-in, Delia. It’s . . . um . . . a cleaning lady. I hired someone to help you.” He wouldn’t look me in the eye.



I felt my blood pressure rising, and my jaw clenched. “You did . . . what?”

“Yeah. A cleaning lady. I’m sorry. I thought you’d be happy. You keep complaining about all the stuff you have to do in a day and how you can’t get anything done around the house. And since I’m gone a lot and can’t really help much, I just thought that—”

“That what, Matt? That I can’t handle it?” I could handle it. I could.

A car pulled in a few spaces over as we argued. A man in khakis and a long sleeved golf shirt got out, nodded at Matt, and popped his trunk. I ran my fingers through my hair wondering how on earth I must seem, reading my husband the riot act.

“I’m—I’m sorry, Matt. I—it’s just that—I can handle it. Really. I shouldn’t complain so much. I’ll go home and let her know we won’t need her. I don’t want someone cleaning the house. Really. I can do it.”

“Delia. I wish it was that easy, but you can’t. I signed a contract for three months.”

Remi rolled down the window. “Mama, can we—”

“What?!” I screamed much louder than I meant to. Remi rolled the window up, crossed her arms and turned from me. Great.

“Honey, listen. You may come to love her being there. It’ll relieve the pressure on you, you know? Keep things under control.”

“Of course. Apparently, I’m incapable of doing that myself.” I slipped into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. A knob fell off of the radio. Lovely.

## Three

*Confession #3: Even though I'm a grown woman, I still feel like a child sometimes.*

I pulled into the driveway behind Daddy's old Ford beater, feeling foolish. I didn't want to face him, or the woman inside who was under contract to annoy me endlessly for the next three months. Of course it wasn't her fault. Somehow it would end up mine.

A small red-headed woman, probably middle-aged, was standing in a pink house coat at my apron kitchen sink. Her hand moved in circles, scrubbing a pot I'd placed in the dishwasher the night before. What? My pre-rinse wasn't good enough for her?

Daddy sat at the worn table in the breakfast nook, the same table he'd grown up eating around and passed down to me. He was wearing his favorite flannel shirt; the one the boys said made him seem like Santa. He wouldn't look me in the eye, but couldn't contain a wide grin he tried to hide behind sips of his coffee.

He stood and sauntered over with open arms, exaggerating each step. "There's my baby. How are you, Darlin'?"

I gave him the dirty-one-eye.

"What? You were expecting . . . someone else?" He snickered as he turned toward his mug and took another sip.

"Very funny. It's not, you know. The kids were scared to death."

As if on cue, Mason and Bryson ran over to Daddy, quicker than he expected, and almost knocked him over in an overzealous hug. “Pa-pa!”

He tried to regain his balance and set his mug on the table. “Umm. Hey, guys! I missed you.” He hugged them with such force, I worried he might hurt himself.

“You just saw us yesterday, Pa-pa.” Mason grabbed the mug and took a sip. “Eww! Nasty!”

“Watch yourself now, bubba.” Daddy took his mug and held it close to his chest, as if hiding it from Mason. Mason giggled and scrunched his nose as if the thought of another sip was disgusting. “Boy, you don’t know good.” Daddy winked.

I approached the sink and held out my hand to our new helper. “I’m Delia. I hope this crazy old man introduced himself to you.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you earlier.”

“No. It’s fine. I’ve had a . . . a day, I guess. It wasn’t your fault.” I smiled, and genuinely meant it.

Her brown eyes fell to the floor, and she shook her head, turning to her work. Something about her ways made me ache for her. As I started to reach out to her, Matt strode into the kitchen through the garage door.

“So, everyone’s ok now, I hope? Delia, you met Lucy?” Matt smiled at the cleaning woman, then at me.

I tried to give him a sign to let him know to keep his mouth shut in front of all the others—we’d talk later. Of course, he wouldn’t have it.

“What? You’re really going to be mad at me for trying to help you?”

Without acknowledging him, I turned and stepped into the laundry room to put my purse and keys away. Every article of clothing was clean and folded. What was this woman, a cleaning-ninja? A misplaced cup sat on the ironing board and I felt I’d won some pathetic little triumph. Shuffling into the kitchen, I opened the dishwasher and placed it in the top shelf. Heat moved across my cheeks.

## CONFESSIONS OF A CRISPY MOM

Daddy stepped toward me. “Now, you know you need some help, Delia. You just need to admit it, hon. There’s no shame.”

“You really don’t know what you’re talking about, Daddy. Honestly, it’s not your concern.” I searched for a reason to leave the room. All I could find was a plant on the table I needed to place outside. I opened the kitchen door and started out.

Daddy interrupted my escape. “You know, sweetheart, Matt and I have been worried about you. We’ve been talking—”

Of course they were cohorts. I spun around to face them. “You . . . what? What exactly did you discuss? My insufficiency as a mother? Has he told you how much he helps me?” I knew I shouldn’t have said it.

“I’m trying, Delia. Nothing I do is good enough for you.” Matt lowered his gaze and for the first time in a long time I watched him struggle to remain composed, as if I’d truly hurt him.

“Delia, you really shouldn’t talk to him like that in front of the kids.” Daddy nodded toward the hall, where Bryson stood, sucking his finger.

“Why, because you and Mama never fought?”

“No. Your mother and I argued our fair share, Delia. But she never once put me down in front of you or anyone else.” Bryson slipped out of his hiding spot, hugged Daddy’s leg and ran upstairs.

“I know, Daddy. I’ve heard it all before. She was perfect. I remember.” I turned once again to care for the plant. Of course, no one would allow me to get over all of this. To grant me one single minute to calm down or process it. My time was never my own.

Daddy caught me by the arm. “I’m not saying that at all, Delia. She wasn’t perfect. But, she at least showed her husband some respect.” He nodded toward Matt who now leaned against the wall, pinching the wrinkle between his eyes.

Was he kidding me? Was this a set up? “You’re probably right, Daddy. I’m sure she did. But, she wasn’t me. I’m not her.” I could feel my lip curling. “And then she died. The end.”

“Delia!” Matt urged me with his eyes to apologize.

I didn't mean to say it. I swear. My mouth stayed out of control these days. I despised it more than anyone. "Daddy, I'm—"

"Don't, Delia. I've heard enough." He tried to hide the hurt by wiping his face once, lingering over his mouth. He avoided me as he moved past me toward the stairs. "I'll see you boys later," he called out toward the upstairs bedrooms. His voice cracked as he said it. He turned to me. "You're right about one thing. You're not her." He treaded through the kitchen, placed his mug in the sink and walked out through the front door, closing it behind him in such a gentle way, even that got on my nerves.

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I had a way of upsetting everyone I touched lately. My special gift, it would seem. I didn't mean to be abrupt, or snarky, or mean. I spoke my mind, is all. Not something everyone could appreciate. Especially Daddy's generation. He stood by his old school ways, insisting southern women should be gentle and sweet, unassuming and gracious, and well . . . anything but me, I guess. I fled toward his house so quickly after he left, I was sure I'd end up tailgating him. But, as I drove along the winding dirt drive leading to my childhood home, I soon found he wasn't there.

My key turned in the mahogany door, and I stepped into the foyer as a woody smell met me. On a small table by the sidelight window sat a picture of Mama. I was drawn to touch her face. Daddy's favorite picture of her. Her smile filled the frame as she peered up at whoever was behind the camera—Daddy, I'd always assumed. Her green eyes filled with tears, happy ones it seemed. She was beyond beautiful.

The comment I'd made about her earlier filled my mind. "Sorry, Mama," I whispered as I touched her face again and longed for her even more. I closed the door behind me and wandered into the living room. Warmth from the fireplace used earlier pulled me toward the mantle. The six white candles I'd placed in even spaces along it the day before I married Matt, remained, and had never been lit. A ceramic

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bowl I'd made in elementary school sat in the middle, empty, though it usually held Daddy's keys.

I sat on the worn plaid couch, finding the sweet spot I'd coveted as a teen. The day Mama died, every person I'd ever taken a liking to tried to get me to move from it with no success. I could still smell her there. Still feel her leg touching mine as we sat across from Daddy playing scrabble. To this day I doubt he knew what a cheater she was in the game. It nearly drove him mad that she always won, and I never spilled her secret to anyone.

"It's for his own good, Delia," Mama used to say as we'd take to the kitchen to grab a snack, leaving Daddy to wonder how on earth he'd been beat again. "Men are full enough of themselves without winning every game they put their mind to." She winked and pulled me into her with a hug so secure I knew I'd never lack for anything as long as I had her.

Of course, that was just the beginning of my last days with Mama. Being ten years old didn't give me the rights the rest of the family had to knowing all her personal secrets and medical woes. I was sheltered in a way they thought was best, but I'd since resented. If only I had known how much time, I always figured, I'd have done much more with her. For her. But, it wasn't an option afforded to me.

My pocketbook slid off my shoulder and I realized I was still holding it. I set it on the ground and leaned forward, placing my hands on my head. Mama couldn't comfort me now, and I couldn't reach out to her. I needed to calm down. Breathe. I had to find a way to apologize to Daddy and didn't want the conversation to veer again, or for my sassy mouth to lash out. Lord, please.

"Plotting your revenge?" Daddy eased onto the other end of the sofa as the old springs moaned.

My arms flailed and I hit a lamp on the side table, as Daddy rushed to catch it. "Ah! I know it's your house, Daddy—but really . . ."

Laughter filled the room as he took off his Earnhardt baseball hat, sitting it gently on the coffee table and brushing something invisible off the top. His hair was peppered with gray now, something I hadn't

noticed in a while. He leaned over and patted my leg as a stack of envelopes he'd placed in his lap fanned across the couch.

"Wow. Paying bills?" I nodded to the pile with raised eyebrows.

"No, Darlin. Not at all. I was out in the storage shed. Had to get these from the lock box."

Why was every conversation a begging for details on my part? "A stack of wills? Deeds to land all over Randall county? What are they, Daddy? Help me out here."

"They're for you, Delia." He gathered them neatly, and placed them in my lap.

"For me?" I flipped through the first few and noticed they became thinner as the stack went on. They were numbered, but not addressed. "What in the world?"

Daddy took my hand, drew it to his mouth, and kissed it. His gentle blue eyes rested on mine as if to tell me how much he loved me. "They're from your Mama, Delia. Letters she asked me to give you someday. On a day much like this, actually."

I could feel the blood drain from my face. My throat tightened to the point I felt choked. Letters? From Mama? She'd been gone for thirty years. "H-how?" It took my breath away just to say it.

"I thought it was time," he said.

I felt nauseous. Time for what? Time to rip that wound wide open? "Daddy. What could Mama possibly say to me in letters now? Wouldn't these have been better for me right after she died? A ten year old girl could've used some additional moments with her mother—" A gasp broke from somewhere deep inside me and filled me with sadness. A wail from my throat rushed out so quickly, I had no time to bridle it.

"Darlin. No, don't do that. This is how she wanted it, sweetheart. She wanted me to wait until you were . . . well, older. And, um . . . overwhelmed—her word choice, not mine. She said I'd know when, and when is now."

What was he saying? Even when I was ten my own mother could gaze into my future and predict what a colossal failure I would be at

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motherhood? I closed my eyes. Daddy's arms wrapped around me and I tucked my head between his neck and shoulder like I'd done many times in my life before. I longed for everything to be as simple as it was when Mama was here. I longed for her.

I touched the letters in my lap. My fingers recoiled as if burned. "Daddy, I don't think I can. I don't want to know."

"It's not like that, Delia. I mean, well, I've never actually read them, she wouldn't let me. But, she explained what she was doing. She wanted you to have some guidance as a mom. She knew how hard it was. For her and for you."

"I mean, I guess that's wonderful, Daddy. Really. But, I'm not sure she understood what I'm going through. Things today are just, different. You know? I don't want my last memories of her to be stories of cancer eating away her life. I don't want to remember her that way."

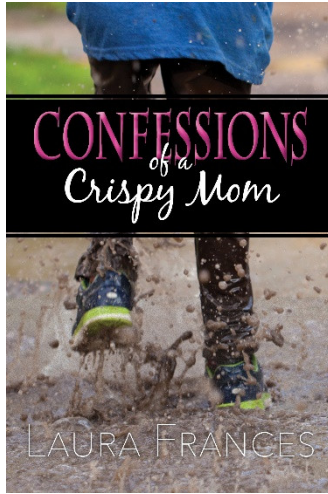
Daddy patted the letters in my lap as he stood. He leaned to kiss me on the forehead. "There's more than cancer that can eat away a life, Darlin'."

He left by the back screen door.





Left wanting more?



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Best,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light gray background. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style and appears to read 'Laura Frances'.

