

Foreword by Lysa TerKeurst, New York Times bestselling author

*Finding God's best in the most unlikely places*

# the heather avis lucky few





ZONDERVAN

*The Lucky Few*

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this Was Not  
the Plan

She's here!" I said to my husband, Josh, on the other end of the phone. I could hear music in the background and pictured him sitting on our white couch at home, his laptop beside him.

I was calling from a tiny hospital waiting room just outside the labor and delivery unit. Brightly colored chairs lined the stark white walls. Other than the muted TV flashing the day's most important news stories, I was alone.

"That was quick," Josh said. "Did you make it there for the birth?"

"Just barely. When Mom and I walked through the door, Harmony was ready to push. Ten minutes later, Kalli was born. It was surreal."

I brought my feet up onto the chair and rested my head on my knees. It was a beautiful spring evening, yet a chill came over me. I hugged my knees to my chest and began to shiver.

"Well, congratulations, Auntie!" Josh's joy was met with my silence. His voice got soft. "Are you okay?"

I felt the knot in my throat begin to grow as my eyes welled with tears. I sat there silently holding the phone with one hand, wiping away tears with the other.

"Babe, are you there?" he asked gently.

"Yes. I'm here," I said in a weepy whisper. "I'm just so sad. It should have been me. It was my turn. This is just not fair. I don't understand." And I let the floodgates open, my head on my knees, my phone drenched with tears.

"I'm so sorry. I am so, so sorry." Josh knew better than to try to fix this unfixable situation. If there was one thing he had learned about me during our years of infertility, it was that sometimes I just wanted

to be sad. Sometimes the possible solutions he'd throw my way would make me want to scream and throw things.

"This is so sucky." I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. "I'm excited for my sister. I love my new niece so much already, but it was my turn." The tears started again. "It was my turn."



I always knew I would be a mom. As a child, when anyone asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" my answer was always, "A mom!"

I had a pretty ideal childhood. I grew up in a safe small town with my mom, dad, and two sisters. I grew up feeling safe, cared for, and loved. My mom stayed home and took care of us girls and the house and my dad. She is full to the brim with love and grace, and it overflows and drenches all who know her. As a child, I was constantly stepping in her puddles of grace. She made mothering look easy, and her ability to mother the way she did made me long for motherhood even more. My dream was to take all that love and grace I had soaked up and squeeze it out onto kids of my own.

By the time I entered college, I was dating Josh, a thoughtful and funny and darn good-looking artist. I had known him for years and knew he was the man I wanted to have babies with, the man I wanted to grow old with. I was twenty years old when we married, and I toasted my new husband with a champagne flute full of sparkling apple cider. Our wedding day was a dream, engulfed in God's goodness and favor.

I loved our first year of marriage. With one year of college left, we lived in a 650-square-foot apartment and waited for our financial-aid checks to come in the mail so we could pay rent and buy groceries.

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Between classes and homework, Josh worked as a valet-parking attendant. We kept his tips in a jar on the fridge, reaching for dollar bills to fill up our gas tanks and our cupboards. He usually parked cars at fancy restaurants, and from time to time, he would come home with takeout containers full of food we could never afford to buy. I would set our tiny table for two—the one crammed against the wall overlooking the parking lot of our apartment complex. I'd light a candle, and we would sit at our tiny table, indulging in expensive food and making plans for a big, adventurous future, which began as soon as we graduated.

We took a six-month detour to the island of Maui before ending up in the quaint Southern California city of Redlands. There I took a job as a special-education teacher while I pursued my teaching credentials, and Josh began working as a graphic designer. Life was good. It was easy. Comfortable.



My older sister, Harmony, called me while I was at work one morning. I let the call go to voice mail, and her vague “hi, it’s me; call me back as soon as you can” led me to call her just as soon as the bell rang for my students to take a break. I shooed them out the door and locked it so I could make the call with no interruptions.

“Hey, Harm. What’s going on?”

“Heather, you’re going to be an auntie!” She yelled so loudly I had to pull the phone away from my ear.

“What? No way? Oh my gosh, Harmony! This is so exciting!” I was jumping up and down and shouting with joy. Some of my students gathered around my locked door, knocking to get in and see what all the commotion was about.



## *The Lucky Few*

I motioned for them to go away. “The bell to come in has not rung yet!” I yelled through the crack in the door.

“Sorry about that. I can’t even believe it. How are you feeling? When are you due?” I had a smile plastered to my face.

“I’m super pukey but really excited. I’m due at the end of June. Heath, you have to come up for the birth,” Harmony said.

“Of course! I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

The bell for class rang, and my students began banging on the locked door.

“Hold your horses, kiddos!”

Harmony, having been a teacher herself, knew my time was limited. “I’ll let you go. Bye, Auntie Heather.” Her voice was full of smiles.

“Bye, Mama!” I hung up the phone, the love for my soon-to-be niece or nephew already beginning to grow.

Nine months later, I got the call that Harmony had gone into labor. Our mom and I drove to the airport and jumped on the first available flight to get to where she lived in Northern California. I sat in the labor and delivery room, feeding Harmony ice chips and holding her leg as she pushed her son into the world.

When Jaxon was a few months old, Josh and I drove to Harmony’s home so he could meet his new nephew. I remember sitting on Harmony’s extra-cushy tan couch with Jaxon cradled on my legs, his head on my knees, his feet gently kicking my belly.

“Gosh, Harm, could you have created a more adorable child?” I said. Jaxon smiled up at me with his perfectly round head and massive cheeks.

“He’s pretty cute,” Harmony yelled out from the kitchen. The scents of fresh basil and sweet tomatoes were filling the house. Seeing Harmony as a mom made me want to be one even more.

Jaxon blew raspberries as he continued to smile up at me. “Harm,



I think we should get pregnant at the same time for your next baby. How fun would that be?”

Harmony came out, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. “I was already planning on it.”

She sat next to me on the couch, and Jaxon’s face beamed when he saw his mama. “We’ll have a joint baby shower,” she said. “It’ll be a blast.” She scooped up Jaxon from my lap, and he spit up all over her shirt. “But can we wait a couple of years?”

“Oh, yes.” I grabbed the kitchen towel from her hands and began wiping up the mess.

“At least a couple of years,” Josh chimed in from his seat across the room.



A couple of years passed, and Josh and I decided it was time to grow our family. By then we were established in real adult careers that paid us salaries and provided us with medical insurance. So Josh and I took the steps needed to get pregnant. Because I was a teacher, we thought the best plan was one that aimed for a birthday near the summer months.

The counting game began. We would try to get pregnant at the optimal time, and I’d count the nine months to figure out when the baby would be born. Then I’d start my period—with grand disappointment—and the whole process would repeat the next month.

This cycle went on for months, each month becoming more painful than the last. A new school year started, one I had hoped to miss—at home with my baby.

About a month before that school year came to an end, I was sitting at my desk grading papers during my planning period when I heard an unexpected knock on my door.

## The Lucky Few

My classroom was in a portable unit located at the far end of the school. I almost always left my classroom door open, but this day was particularly hot and the AC was pumping. I got up from my desk stacked with papers, notebooks, and folders and opened the door.

“Hey, Mrs. A. Do you have a minute?” It was one of my sophomore algebra students, Jen.

“Of course. Except, where are you supposed to be right now?”

She handed me a green slip. “I got this pass from Mrs. Frances. I told her I needed to go to the nurse, but really I just need someone to talk to.” Her eyes were red and swollen, and her thick mascara had left a black map on her cheeks.

Jen and I had been through a lot that year. She stepped foot in my classroom the first day of school ready for a fight, doing everything she could to prove she was not worth loving. I liked her from the second we met. She was unaware that her type is my favorite type, and that I had patience for her shenanigans and could see right through the sharp exterior she had built to protect herself from life’s circumstances. It took a couple of months, but she soon began to see in herself the potential I saw. She started to trust that an adult could have her best in mind.

“Well, come in, sweetie. Let’s sit over here.” We walked to the old blue couch pushed up against the window. I sat down on one end, and Jen collapsed right next to me and fell into my arms crying.

“Hey, Jen, what’s going on?”

“I didn’t think it could happen.” She wiped her nose with the sleeve of her black lace sweater. “I mean, I had an abortion last year and thought I couldn’t get pregnant again.”

*Dear, sweet Jesus, who is teaching these kids about the birds and the bees?* “Honey, are you pregnant right now?”

“Mm-hmm.” She nodded and began to sob. “My parents are going to kill me. I don’t know what to do.”

## This Was Not the Plan

My heart sank. My heart sank so deep I didn't know if I would ever be able to retrieve it. My fifteen-year-old student with little to no support system was pregnant for the second time in a year. I sat in disbelief as she soaked my shoulder with her tears.

"Oh, honey, it's going to be okay. I can walk with you through this. I can be with you when you talk to your parents. It's going to be okay." While I comforted her, I felt the strangest mix of emotions. Sadness and jealousy begin to wrap themselves around every cell in my being and I, too, began to sob. We sat there together in the coolness of my classroom on my old blue couch. With eyes full of tears, I looked up to heaven. *This cannot be happening. Dear Jesus, what on earth?*

It seemed as though the situation with my student, Jen, marked the beginning of a frustrating, heartbreaking tornado of infertility. The history books may not reflect it, but in the years 2005–2008, everyone was having a baby. Everyone but me.

On Sunday mornings at church, I would look around in disbelief at the number of swollen bellies in the seats around me. One week, an associate pastor made a joke during announcements, saying there must be something in the water because so many women were expecting babies. I wanted to run up on the stage, punch him in the face, and then grab the mic and yell at everyone for being so insensitive and forgetting about me. But I sat in my seat with my fists clenched and my eyes welling with tears. Neither the pastor nor the women around me with glowing skin and maternity clothes were trying to hurt me, and I knew that. But the longing I felt for a baby was becoming more than I could bear. And really, there *must* have been something in the water.



“Heather, where are my new shorts?” Josh yelled from the laundry room.

“If they aren’t in the dryer, I don’t know,” I called back.

The summer weather was calling for shorts and light dresses. I walked to the other side of the bed in our room and pulled the corner of the quilt straight. The windows were open, letting in the sound of the chirping birds and a wonderful summer breeze. Josh and I were about to embark on a rare, do-nothing kind of day. The phone rang.

I called to Josh, “Can you get that?” I heard him pick up the phone.

“Hey, Harmony,” I heard him say. “Yeah, hang on, I’ll get her.” Josh walked in and handed me the phone. “It’s your sister.”

“Hey, Harm. What’s up?”

“Well, guess what?” Her voice was a mix of hesitation and elation.

I knew. My stomach dropped. And panic set in because I didn’t know how to respond and I didn’t want to hear what she was going to say next. So I held the phone, silent.

“You’re going to be an auntie again, Heather. I’m pregnant.” Harmony made the announcement gently this time, knowing the pain it could cause. She had walked this brutal infertility path with me. She knew how desperate I was to be the one making that very announcement. She knew the plan we had made sitting in her living room. Together. We were supposed to have our babies together.

“Wow, Harmony. Congratulations.” I began to pace the floor, trying so hard not to cry, but there was no stopping the tears.

“I’m sorry, Heath,” Harmony whispered, she herself crying on the other end of the phone.

I took a deep breath, shoving my emotions aside so I could celebrate with my sister. I sat down on the freshly made bed, wrinkling the quilt.

“Harmony, do *not* be sorry. I am really and truly so happy for you

guys. And I'm going to be an auntie again! You know how much I love being an auntie." Somehow I was able to stop my crying, take the focus off myself, and transfer it to where it belonged.

We talked for a few more minutes about due dates and morning sickness, and then I pushed the red button to hang up the phone and let it fall to the floor. Josh came and sat next to me on the bed, his arm around my shoulder. I buried my head in my hands and in complete and total brokenness wept, the sound of my sobs clashing with the song of the birds. Beauty and pain.

The phone call from Harmony was the rancid icing on the stale cake. My plans had officially fallen apart. It seemed as though God had pulled out the rug from under me, allowing me to tumble into this deep unknown, arms flailing, out of control. Little did I know that God was not only allowing it, but he was ushering me there, into the depths of *his* plans.

So I fell. Brokenhearted and gasping for air, I grabbed hold of anything I could to help me fill my belly with a baby. Out of the kindness of their hearts, people told me to relax more, to eat this, to not eat that, to get away for the weekend, to stop thinking about it, to go shopping for new clothes. Out of desperation, I tried it all. But the thing is, friends, a relaxing weekend in Palm Springs noshing on organic kale and buying a new wardrobe will not get a girl pregnant.

So I ended up in the office of a fertility specialist. His price tag was high, but money is just money to a desperate person. I answered questions and sat through an exam. Discoveries led me weeks later into a different doctor's office and then onto an operating table for a diagnostic surgery. More weeks passed, and I found myself undergoing an invasive and painful dye test, which led to a terrible and freakish infection, which resulted in several visits to the ER.

When I was well enough to go back to work, I made an appointment

with my ob-gyn to figure out what had happened and what the next step would be.

I arrived for my appointment a few minutes early. The waiting area was hopping. I found an empty seat next to an expectant mom who looked about ready to pop. I kept my head down, afraid I'd accidentally give her a dirty and jealous look. This infertility business was a nasty thing. I grabbed the closest magazine and mindlessly flipped through the pages, looking at photos of babies and moms, skimming the "Top 10 Toys" and parenting how-tos.

"Heather." At the sound of my name, I tossed the useless magazine on my chair. "It's nice to see you again," the nurse said, and I followed her over to the scale. She took my weight and led me across the hall.

"The doctor will see you in his office today, right over here."

I thought it was strange we would meet there rather than in an exam room. We had always met in an exam room.

"Have a seat. He'll be right in." She closed the door and walked away.

I sat in the overstuffed chair across from my doctor's cluttered desk. Behind it were floor-to-ceiling bookshelves full of medical journals and framed pictures of his family. His wife looked young, sandwiched between him and his two daughters. Seeing the photo of his family made me wonder if they had any trouble conceiving. Could he relate to his patients at all?

My thoughts were interrupted by a soft knock at the door and then the creaking of the hinges as my doctor stepped into his office.

"Heather, what in the world happened?" His Eastern European accent was thick.

"Well, that's what I'm here to find out. What *did* happen?"

"First, I am sorry about the timing of things. That I was out of town when you were in and out of the emergency room. I've read your

chart, but please do tell me in your own words what happened after the dye test.”

He sat behind the desk.

“Well, a couple of days after, I was at home having dinner with friends when I started feeling some awful cramping. Within a couple of hours, I was in a fetal position on the floor, in unbelievable amounts of pain. My husband took me to the emergency room, and for more than a week, I was in and out of the ER, in unspeakable pain. The doctor on call told me the dye test had led to a terrible infection in my reproductive organs. He gave me antibiotics. Honestly, the whole thing is a bit of a blur. I still don’t feel 100 percent.” The tone of my voice was matter-of-fact and almost accusatory.

“Again, I’m sorry this happened to you. Less than 2 percent of women who have the dye test are prone to an infection of that magnitude.”

“So, what does this mean for me?” As soon as I asked the question, I had a feeling I did not want to know the answer. I looked at the door and thought about running. But it was too late; he was already talking.

I watched his mouth move, his brow furrow, and his head shake in pity, but I was having an out-of-the-body experience. The world around me began spinning and only select words out of his mouth—“permanent damage,” “inability to bear children,” “nothing we can do”—came into focus, like big neon signs flashing the doom of my future. I stared out the window at the beautiful, sunny Southern California day while he said in so many words that I am infertile, that without lots of invasive and unnatural assistance from specialists in the field, there is simply no way my body can do its part in making a baby.

“Heather? Are you okay?” His voice brought me back to reality.

“Uh-huh.” It was the only sound I could make.

“Can I answer any questions?”



“Nuh-uh.” I knew if I began to speak, I would crumble into a million broken pieces right there on his office floor.

“Okay, well I want to see you back in a month for a full exam. Again, I am so sorry all of this happened to you.” His eyes reflected his sincerity.

I gave a weak smile and bolted for the door. I walked as quickly as I could through the crowded waiting room, pushing my way through the sea of pregnant women. I ran down the stairwell to the ground floor and out the automatic double doors and gasped for air.

There were people all around me. Some were on their phones. One was in a wheelchair. I didn’t really see any of them, but I know they had to have seen me. I know they saw me, because I was the woman on the sidewalk, unashamedly sobbing. The news struck deep into the core of me, killing who I thought I was or needed to be, slowly and painfully severing my womanhood from my being.

As I walked toward my car, broken and weeping, I let go of the hope I had clung to like the string of a balloon. Sadness consumed me as all the hope I had left floated away. This thing—a woman’s ability to create and grow children—did not exist in me. There was nothing I could do about it. There was no new plan I could put into place so I could gain control over what should be a natural aspect of womanhood. All my womanly parts were there, but they were broken, and unlike a car that refuses to get from point A to point B, replacing or fixing the broken pieces was not an option.

The news I received that afternoon is life-altering news, the kind that cannot be taken back, the kind that enters through your ears and into your brain and somehow seeps into every drop of blood pulsating through your body. When I got home, I made my way to my room and collapsed onto my bed. I sank into the mattress, hyperaware of my empty womb and the string of hope I had let slip through my

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fingers. I felt numb, wishing for yesterday to come find and rescue me. Yesterday was full of plans and possible solutions, and false ideas about what I could control. Yesterday I had hope of a working womb, one ready and excited to grow a life and make me a mom.

The book of Isaiah tells of a God who gives us “a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (61:3). That day after my appointment, I woke up with no new plans to fix my problems and gain control of my situation. I felt like a pile of ashes, my purpose and abilities consumed by a fire. And like a pile of ashes being blown in the wind, my hope for becoming a mother swirled around me, a dirty mess.

But God’s Word whispered in my ear, “There is beauty here . . . yes even here.”



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