

Rachel's Hope
By Natasha Hayden

Rachel was tired and moody. She was at least a week overdue for her monthly flow, but that didn't mean she was pregnant. It more likely meant she was stressed because she wasn't pregnant, hadn't been pregnant month after month, even that month when she'd missed her cycle entirely, 25 times now, 25 months. And she was 25 years old, young still but steadily approaching 30. She didn't want to be an old woman by the time her kids got through high school. She wanted a full brood, or at least four, and she wanted them now before she lost the energy to go through with it. But her dreams seemed to go down the drain, literally, every month.

Rachel unwrapped the test stick. There had been months when she hadn't even bothered to use a test, not wanting to be disappointed by the results she was now so familiar with, but on a longer cycle, she'd learned that finding out the truth sooner than later was far less painful than waiting and hoping one week, then two, before her period finally came late. She'd also learned, the hard way, that if the test said negative, it was negative, and there was no point in hoping that the test had been wrong. It never had been yet.

She used the test and set it on the edge of the sink. She couldn't help herself as she watched the color creep over the viewing window. Even after all these months, though it seemed that hope waned ever more easily and frequently, there was always still a bit of hope.

There was something odd about the test this time. She looked at the box. Ah, yes, she'd bought a different type, a cheaper kind, and it didn't use a plus sign for a positive result. She looked at the test again. Though it hadn't been the three minutes wait time the directions suggested, she knew it didn't take that long for the results to show. She looked back at the box, then again at the lines in the result window.

Calmly, she washed her hands, opened the door to the bathroom, and walked down the hall to the study. She poked her head inside, and her husband, Joe, looked up from his lounge chair and his book.

"Well, the test says I'm pregnant, but I don't believe it."

"Really?" Joe smiled radiantly and shoved himself out of the chair.

"I don't want to believe it for sure until we've seen a doctor, okay?"

"Okay." But he was still smiling like crazy as he came toward her and gently put his hand on her stomach.

"I guess I'll call the doctor," she said.

Rachel waited in the exam room alone. How would they tell her? Why was it taking so long? Were they trying to figure out how to tell her it had been a mistake? She was going to feel so embarrassed.

The doctor walked in and smiled at her. "Hi, Rachel. So, you're pregnant?"

Rachel didn't understand. "Um...I...I guess?" Didn't the doctor know?

"Everything's positive." The doctor was still smiling.

Slowly, it dawned on her what she was being told. But it felt so unreal. Surely they were talking about another person. Rachel smiled uncertainly.

"Do you feel sick?"

"No."

"Any pain?"

"No."

"Swelling?"

"No."

"Have you felt any movement?"

"Um...no." Was that possible? Wasn't it kind of early?

"So, I'm guessing by my little calendar here that you are about seven weeks along. That would put your due date around May 31."

Seven weeks? Surely not. She hadn't even been fertile until four weeks ago. But the doctor said they counted from the end of her last period.

She had a due date. Mentally, she fudged it a bit: May 31 to June 13. The baby would be born between its two grandmas' birthdays. How perfect!

She lay on the table as the doctor prodded her abdomen. "There it is. A little bump."

The doctor could feel her pregnancy! She really was pregnant.

They scheduled her follow-up appointment when she would be able to hear the heartbeat, and she got a prescription for pre-natal vitamins.

Rachel went straight from the doctor's office to the party store to see if she could find miniature baby dolls as small as her finger tip. She wanted to be creative when she told her in-laws, not just blurt it out. Perhaps she would serve them all drinks with the babies frozen into their ice cubes. She'd seen that done once at a baby shower; when the ice melted, the first person who noticed her baby drop to the bottom of the cup was supposed to yell, "My water broke!"

But first she'd tell her own family. There was a get-together planned for the coming weekend. She debated whether she would be creative or just tell them straight out and opted for the latter. While her in-laws were still clueless, her family already knew she was trying to get pregnant.

"I guess we should have stopped at a gas station in that last town. I thought we would have found a rest area by now! Those bushes are starting to look really tempting." Rachel pressed on her full bladder, hoping somehow to hold it together until it could find relief. They were headed out of state to her parents' house.

"Do you want me to pull over somewhere?"

They zipped past a strand of spindly Charlie-Brown-Christmas-like trees.

"No, I'll hold it."

The miles and the minutes inched past all too slowly.

"I guess I shouldn't have had so much water before we left, but I'm trying to be healthier for the baby. I didn't even bring dip for the raw veggies." Rachel looked at the container of broccoli, carrots, and cauliflower and wrinkled her nose slightly. "I don't know how long I'll be able to eat like that."

Joe laughed.

"Oh, well. It's better than slugs and good for the baby."

"Slugs, huh?" Joe grinned. "Is that, like, your motto for the pregnancy: 'It's better than slugs and good for the baby'?"

"Ha, ha. I guess so!"

They fell into silence, Rachel focusing all her energy on keeping still and not aggravating the problem.

"I'm feeling something weird," Rachel said after a few minutes.

"Do I need to pull over?" Joe asked for the second time.

"No, I mean, well, maybe—if you see a big enough tree—but that's not what I'm talking about. The right side of my abdomen throbs slightly every now and then. Do you think that's normal?"

"Did it just start?" Joe asked. "It's probably just because you have to go to the bathroom."

"Yeah, that's probably it."

Two rest area stops and a couple hundred miles later, they were enveloped in greetings and hugs from relatives and in-laws they hadn't seen in several months. After a meal and plenty of talk, Joe and Rachel pulled her parents away for a private early evening walk and told them the news.

"Really?" Rachel's mom squealed as she turned and hugged her daughter tightly.

"Congratulations!" her dad said, squeezing Joe's hand.

"We haven't told anyone else yet. We wanted you to know first," Rachel said. "I'll tell the rest of the family when we get back to the house."

Rachel hurried to the bathroom when they got inside, admonishing her parents to keep quiet until she could announce the news herself.

"Hurry! I can barely wait!" her mom said.

Rachel meant to hurry, until she noticed the dot of red. She began to panic, and tears streamed down her cheeks. Blood? There wasn't supposed to be blood, right? She remembered reading somewhere that some women could bleed a little when the pregnancy implanted itself in the uterus. She took several deep breaths and wiped the tears away. Maybe that's all this was. Shaking, she washed her hands and opened the door cautiously, not wanting anyone to see her distress.

Her mother, smiling brightly, looked at her from across the room, and then her smile faded. Rachel motioned her over.

She began to cry again as she turned into the first empty bedroom, her mother behind her. "I'm bleeding. Just a little." A sob escaped. "What should I do?" She sat on the edge of the bed, her head in one hand, her other fingers splayed over her belly. The commotion brought Joe. She sobbed in his arms, fear clutching her heart and soul.

Rachel spoke through her tears after she got off the phone. "The doctor wanted me to come in right now, but I told her I wasn't even in the same state. She said I'm to go on complete bed rest until I can get back home. And if I start cramping or bleeding a lot, I'm supposed to go to the ER."

Rachel's mother nodded. "Do you still want to tell everyone?"

"Yeah, I do. Let me do it right now. Then I'll lie down."

Most of the family was already sitting in the living room, talking and laughing.

"Hey, everyone, Rachel and Joe have an announcement to make."

Rachel smiled. It was going to be okay. They were still pregnant, after all.

She told the news simply and received the congratulations. Then she added, "But there are some complications, and I'm going to have to retire early." A tear slipped down her cheek. "I've been confined to bed, but I wanted you all to know first."

Rachel bowed out, but several aunts followed her back to the bedroom. They were quickly appraised of the situation.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry," Aunt Sarah said. "I bled at the beginning of my pregnancy, too, and the doctor told me to get bed rest, and I did and everything turned out fine."

"I bled through most of my pregnancy. The doctors were amazed when my baby girl came anyway, completely healthy," Aunt Becky said.

"See?" Rachel's mom said. "You'll be fine."

Later, when everyone had gone to sleep, Rachel sobbed into Joe's chest as they lay in bed. "I'm so afraid. What if we lose it?" She drifted off into a troubled sleep as the tears continued to fall.

Rachel woke. It was dark, still night. She'd been tossing and turning for awhile, feeling mild discomfort in her stomach. But now she was awake. She needed to get up and go to the bathroom. Her stomach ached. But it was because of the ache that she didn't want to get up. She didn't want to know what it meant.

Necessity compelled her from bed.

As soon as Rachel was in the bathroom, the fire in her belly let loose. She rocked back and forth, just wanting the pain to end, wanting to throw up but not quite willing to let herself, wanting nothing but the pain to go away even though she was losing everything...everything down the toilet.

"Joe?" she moaned. "Help."

Joe rushed in and then stopped still. But Rachel couldn't talk anymore.

"Can I do anything?"

Rachel just shook her head and motioned him away.

A few minutes later, her body aching and tired, Rachel tried to go back to bed. She just wanted to lie down. Maybe the pain would go away.

Joe watched her.

"The baby's gone," she said tightly, groaning as she slid under the covers. She moaned and curled in a fetal position. "It hurts so much!" She gasped and tossed, trying to find a position that would offer even the smallest relief. She moaned. It gave her something to focus on.

"I'll wake your parents." He was calm, but Rachel didn't notice, didn't care. She made another trip to the bathroom. The blood felt strange and heavy as it slipped from her body. There was so much of it.

Joe came back into the room. "They're ready to take us to the hospital. Can you get your coat and shoes on?" He brought them over to her.

Rachel moaned. "Not yet. I can't move."

They waited together, until the crippling pain had subsided enough for her to get up again. She slipped on the coat but didn't bother with the shoes. Joe carried them, and slowly, Joe supporting her, they moved through the house and out the door to the car. They put her in the front seat and laid the seat back three quarters of the way.

"Get the trash can," Rachel said, her voice barely even a whisper. Joe set it on her lap. She still felt like throwing up but hadn't yet. She closed her eyes, enduring the pain, thinking of nothing but the pain.

Her mom sat in the seat behind her and put an extra sweater under Rachel's head. Her dad drove, and Joe sat in the back seat next to her mom.

The nearest ER was 30 minutes away. In the dark, they made a wrong turn and got lost, but a policeman pointed them back to the right road. Shutting her mind down to the outside, narrowing everything to her breathing, Rachel half slept. By the time they reached the hospital, the pain was a dull ache in the pit of her stomach. When they opened her door, she moved cautiously. Joe put her shoes on

for her and offered her the bra he'd tucked away when they'd left the house. Rachel looked down at her coffee-mug-print pajamas and managed a smile.

"I don't think it will matter much in there."

Joe gave their information to the woman at the counter, and the four of them sat down to wait. It was 3:00 am. A nurse brought a warm blanket for Rachel. She thanked her with a smile, just glad to be rid of the pain, calm after the storm.

There were others in the ER. One lady gave birth to her baby in the hallway, didn't even make it to a room. Through the southern accent of the ER attendants, Rachel heard her name. She got up and walked slowly toward the office.

"Are you Mr. Landon?" the male attendant asked.

"No, um, sorry, I thought I heard Mrs. Stanton."

The attendant smiled kindly. "We'll get to you in just a moment, sweetheart," he said.

Rachel smiled back and returned slowly to her seat.

Finally they called her in. They were so gentle and kind. Southern charm. They asked her questions, put a band on her wrist, and showed her to a private room. A nurse gave her a hospital gown—"See? I didn't need the bra, after all," Rachel told Joe wryly—and a container to pee in.

Rachel didn't think she had any fluid left in her, but she took the container anyway and headed to the restroom. This time in the bathroom, she was resigned to what was leaving her body. The urine sample was black with it. As the last vestiges slipped away, she said her final goodbyes.

She returned to her private room with Joe, and they waited. At 4:00 am, there were only infomercials on TV. They watched them and even laughed at them, a temporary relief in the midst of the sadness.

A nurse brought a handful of tools in and laid them out on a tray nearby. Rachel looked at them uncomfortably. They waited.

Finally, the doctor, a southern black man, came in and introduced himself. For a brief moment, Rachel was uncomfortable that the doctor was a man. She'd only ever had a woman do her exams, but she was almost beyond caring now. She was here being looked after, and the people were very kind.

The exam went quickly. The doctor told her that the cervix seemed fine and that they just needed to do an ultrasound and get some blood taken from her arm. Then he finally noticed the black urine sample.

"What's this?" he asked.

Rachel told him sheepishly.

He smiled sympathetically and threw it away. "Okay, we're going to need to get a mini-catheter in you."

Rachel nodded, only slightly nervous at the mention of the catheter. She'd already been prodded past the point of embarrassment, and no pain could be worse than what she'd already experienced.

Through it all, Rachel remained surprisingly mellow, so much so that when her mom came in later to see how she was doing, she remarked on Rachel's calmness. But Rachel was simply glad to be taken care of and to have the doctors make sure her body was okay. For now, she felt relief, but she didn't let herself dwell too long on thoughts of what she'd lost. The tears would come eventually, but in a way, she'd already cried for the baby that night, before she'd gone to bed, when she'd been so afraid of this exact thing happening.

Joe called his parents and then relayed to Rachel what they'd said.

"They were shocked," he admitted. Tears unexpectedly sprang to Rachel's eyes. Somehow, telling someone on the outside what had happened made it seem more real...but just briefly. Rachel looked toward the ceiling and pushed her tears and emotions away for the time being.

They waited a few hours more, and then the nurse finally came to wheel her bed to the ultrasound room. Rachel didn't even have to get up. Joe accompanied her.

The room she was wheeled to was dimly lit. The nurse asked her many of the same questions she'd already answered several times, but it had to go on the ultrasound record separately, Rachel figured. The nurse rubbed gel over Rachel's abdomen and then prodded it gently with the machine. She took awhile, pushing this way and that.

"Nothing. I figured it was too small," the nurse said. "We're going to have to go internal."

Rachel wasn't surprised the nurse hadn't found anything and didn't expect the internal ultrasound to reveal anything either, but this was standard procedure and they had to be certain the tissue passed or it could harm her body.

"We'll have the doctor look at this, and meanwhile, you can wait back in your room," the nurse said when she was done. She wheeled Rachel out and stopped by the blanket warmers. "How about another warm blanket?" she asked.

"Yes, please," Rachel said, smiling. She was plenty warm, but the blankets straight out of the warmer were so cozy and comforting.

Again, Joe and Rachel waited, and finally, the doctor came in to give them the news they already knew.

"We couldn't find anything in the ultrasound, but your hormone levels are pretty high. It looks like the baby spontaneously aborted. I'm sorry."

Rachel nodded. She didn't cry. The calm she'd felt through the entire hospital visit was still with her.

"Would you like us to do a D and C and make sure everything is cleared out, or would you like to let your body finish the job on its own?"

Rachel thought about the unused tools on the tray by the bed. "I'll just let it do it on its own," she opted.

The doctor recommended Rachel visit her own doctor in two days to make sure the hormone levels had dropped appropriately, and then she was free to go. They joined Rachel's parents in the waiting room and walked out into the sunlight of the new day.

Six months later, Rachel was tired and moody. She was at least a week overdue for her monthly flow. After three months of trying to get pregnant without success, she was feeling the strain. And what was more, the events of the previous October had begun to fade. It seemed like a dream now, something perhaps that had happened to someone else. Surely she'd only imagined being pregnant. But, no, despite the surreal feeling of it all, she knew it had happened. There had been a seven-week-old fetus, and though it hadn't been old enough to have any semblance of a body, she believed it had been given a soul at conception. Her baby—she thought of it as a girl—in some form or body, had gone to heaven. They would see each other one day. The daughter would be introduced to the mother for the first time. It was almost too astounding to consider...almost. However awe-inspiring it was, that hope and thought was what made it all seem real to her again.

She unwrapped the test stick and remembered all those months when she hadn't even bothered to use a test, not wanting to be disappointed by the results she was now so familiar with. The test was perhaps more enemy than friend, but one thing could be said for it; it had never lied to her yet.

She used the test and set it on the edge of the sink. She couldn't help herself as she watched the color creep over the viewing window. Even after all these months, though it seemed that hope was so dim, a gray shadow in a blackened world, there was always still a bit, just the smallest pinprick.

It was negative.

A small part of Rachel seemed to die as she waited and watched five minutes, then ten, for the faintest line to appear.

The End

Author's Note: Hope, by the very definition of the word, is hope unrequited. Yet this "assurance of things unseen" is considered a good thing. Though to constantly hope is to have your deepest desires dashed again and again, without this feeling—this belief and expectation of a better future—there are some who would surely die of grief.